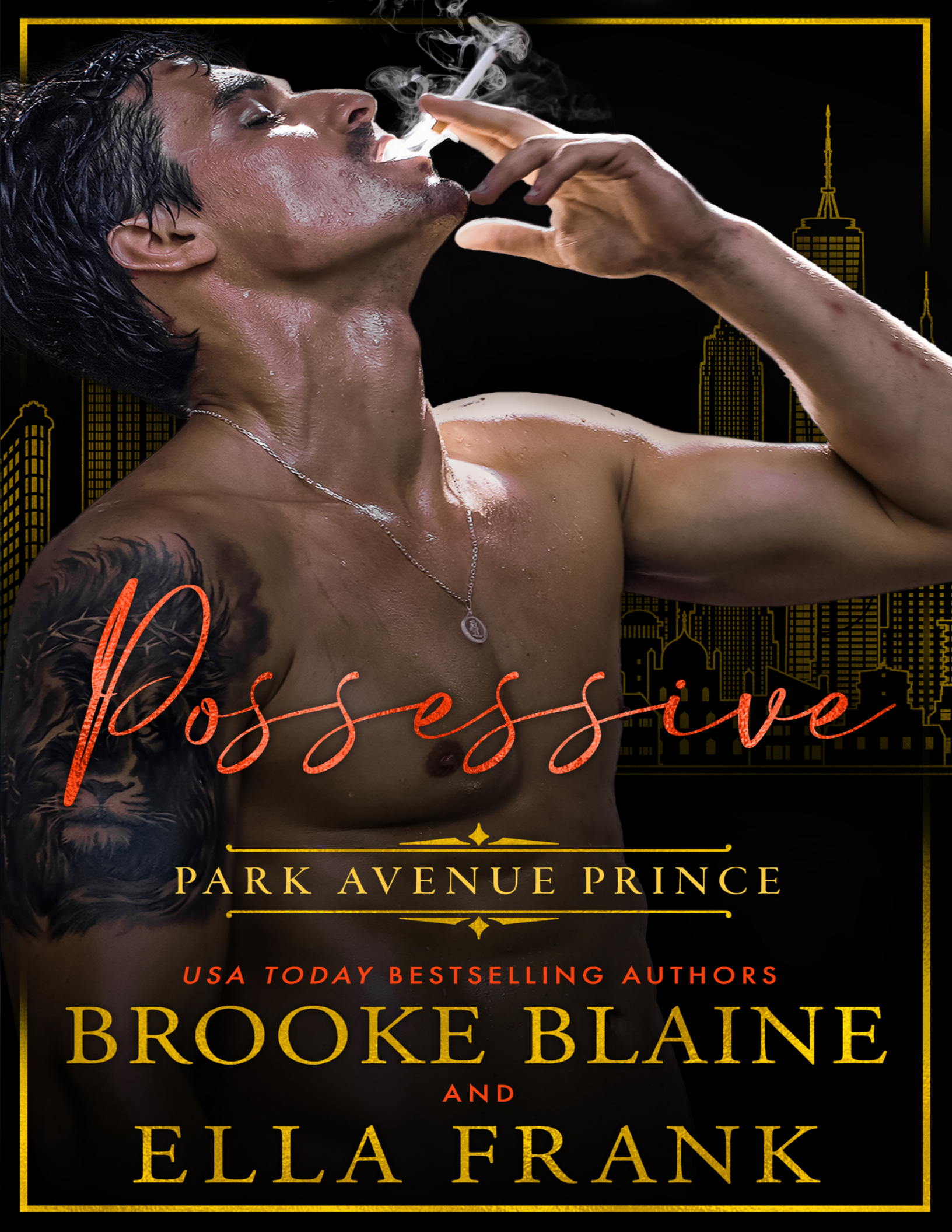
Possessive
PARK AVENUE PRINCE
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHORS
BROOKE BLAINE
AND
ELLA FRANK

# *possessive park avenue prince*

BROOKE BLAINE

ELLA FRANK

*OceanofPDF.com*

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# *synopsis*

**Who are we? Like you even need to ask. We're the seven richer-than-sin legacies causing debauchery at the prestigious Astor University in Manhattan.**
**Some call us spoiled.**
**Some call us trouble.**
**But *everyone* calls us the Park Avenue Princes.**

Daire Connery
"The Bad Boy"

I'm not a man of many words. But when I do speak, it usually starts with *F* and ends with *you*.
Keep to myself. Don't let anyone in. That's how I like it.
That's usually how everyone else likes it too. My scowl keeps them all away—all except *him*.

We may both be Park Avenue Princes, but we would never work.
We don't belong in each other's *real* worlds.
He's too soft for mine; mine's too harsh for his.

But I can't stop thinking about him. About those pale grey eyes that see right through me. The ballsy way he gives right back whatever I dish out.
I like that. Respect it.
Want more of it…

Which is why when I find out his ex is bullying him, it makes me want to rip that bastard a new one. Makes me lose my goddamn mind.

Because no one touches Gavin Truitt. No one but me.

***Possessive Park Avenue Prince is the fourth standalone novel in the Park Avenue Princes world.***

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Thank You
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# ONE

## *gavin*

December

I DIDN’T KNOW how long I’d been up here. Long enough for darkness to fall, and for the once-roaring fire to simmer down to crackling embers.

I stared at the dwindling flames absently and curled my legs beneath me on the cream velvet couch, but the move sent a wave of pain through my body and I flinched. The ache in my head, my arms, and my back lingered, even after popping a few pain pills, which was why I’d skipped out on going out with the guys. There was no way I’d be able to mask what happened today, and no way in hell were they finding out.

So I’d hidden away in my favorite spot in the Towers where I lived, a place called the Secret Garden, where very few residents ever ventured. Definitely not any of the Park Avenue Princes, as my friends and I were often called. The space was too quiet for their loud personalities, and without the promise of a fully stocked bar or the opportunity to meet a hookup, they ventured to other, more entertaining spots.

That suited me just fine. I liked having a place to escape to when I needed it, and the cozy garden lounge, with its lush greenery and floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, was perfect.

Tearing my eyes away from the fireplace, I looked down at my laptop and tried yet again to focus on the building codes and inspection regulations of my current interior design assignment. The words only blurred together on the screen, a jumble of nothing that made sense, but when a tear escaped

down my cheek, I realized it wasn't the lines on the page that were the problem.

It was me.

Sighing, I wiped my face with the sleeve of my shirt and willed the stupid tears back. Joey wasn't worth them, and I refused to let him have any more power over me or my emotions.

If I hadn't been so in my head, I would've noticed I wasn't alone anymore. I would've been able to hide my tear-streaked face before Daire caught me and made up some lie. But his footsteps were quiet, and it wasn't until he was standing in front of me that I even knew he was there.

With his arms crossed over his leather jacket, his dark eyes roved over me in the pissed-off, assessing way that was all Daire, and when he met my gaze, his scowl deepened.

He didn't have to say a word and already I was looking away, cursing the fact that out of all my friends, it had to be Daire that found me. The most volatile, hotheaded one, my soon-to-be roommate and the one who would lose his shit the most if he knew what happened today.

"Aren't you supposed to be out?" I said, trying for nonchalance as I shifted my focus back to my laptop.

A long silence passed, and when he still didn't say anything, I glanced up.

Apparently, that was what he'd been waiting for, because he said, "I was."

*Oh.* Had I been up here that long? "What time is it?"

"Late."

"So, what, you're here to make sure I get to bed on time?"

"You been crying?"

I blinked at the abrupt change in direction and swallowed. "No."

"You're a shit liar."

"I'm not lying."

Daire narrowed his eyes, seeing right through me, and I knew I needed to get a handle on this before he made it a big deal. I shut my laptop and stood up to leave, but the sudden movement made me wince.

"What the fuck's wrong?" he said.

"Nothing. My…leg's asleep, that's all."

"Bullshit."

I met his stare, turning my chin up defiantly. “You sit like that for hours and see if your legs don’t go numb.”

I went to brush by him, but Daire reached for my arm to stop me—

Bad move.

His hand landed on the tender spot on my upper arm that I’d been trying to forget about, and the stab of pain that lanced through me wasn’t something I could hide.

Daire dropped his hold immediately, looking down at where I’d covered myself with an oversized sweater. His jaw visibly clenched, and I felt my pulse begin to race as I tried to come up with a good excuse, one he wouldn’t question.

When he opened his mouth again, his words were practically a growl. “Tell me.”

“Daire, it’s—” I tugged at the cuff of my sweater to make sure it was in place.

There was no way he could see what was under it. No way he could see evidence of any crime. But Daire’s scowl only became more murderous, and it was clear he didn’t need evidence—he already knew what had gone down.

“What did he do to you?”

“I don’t know what you’re—”

“Gavin.” Daire took a step forward, and my words got stuck somewhere in the back of my throat. “What did Joey do to you?”

My pulse pounded as I stared up into Daire’s determined face. There was no way he was going to let this go until he got the answer he wanted, and I didn’t want any part in whatever kind of vengeance I could see swirling in his eyes.

“It doesn’t matter.” I carefully picked up my laptop.

“The fuck it doesn’t. He put his hands on you. I wanna know why.”

“And I don’t want to tell you,” I snapped back, straightening to my full height. “If I wanted that I would’ve come and found you. Just leave it, Daire. We broke up. It’s over. The last thing I want or need is you tracking him down and making everything worse.”

I went to step around him and leave, but Daire held up a hand. “Wait.”

“I really don’t—”

“Please?”

That one word had my feet freezing in place. I couldn't remember *ever* hearing Daire say please or thank you to anyone.

His eyes were on my sweater, as though he'd be able to somehow see through it if he stared long enough.

"Talk to me." He gestured to the couch and moved over to it.

My first instinct was to say no and head back to my place. No good could come from telling Daire, or anyone, about what had happened with Joey.

One of our group's unspoken rules was: fuck with one of us, you fuck with all of us. Revenge was something we all thrived on. But usually it was in response to gossip or blackmail. How would that revenge look against someone getting physical with one of us? I had no idea, and I wasn't sure I wanted to.

I worried my lower lip with my teeth, trying to decide what the smart move was here. Did I want to talk to someone about this? Yes. But could I trust Daire to keep it just between us? I *wanted* to say yes. It wasn't as though he was tight with any of the other guys. But that didn't mean he wouldn't hunt down Joey and—

"Gavin."

"Okay." I walked back to the couch and gingerly took the seat beside him. "But if I tell you, you have to promise to keep it here. You can't tell the rest of the guys. Not even Van." He said nothing. "*Daire*."

"Okay, whatever, I won't tell them. Now what the fuck happened?"

He lounged back in the corner of the couch with a booted foot propped up on his knee, and to an undiscerning eye he looked cool, calm, relaxed. But when I saw his clenched fist resting on the arm of the seat, I shook my head.

"I don't think this is a good idea."

"Why the hell not?"

"Because I don't want Joey's death on my conscience, that's why not." I went to stand again, but a hand on my leg stilled me.

That was the second time tonight that Daire had touched me, and probably the fourth time in all the years we'd known each other. But the warm fingers resting lightly on my leg were enough to make me pause.

"I won't kill Joey."

"Promise?"

"Promise. Now talk."

I settled back into the couch and tried to think of the best place to start. “He was jealous.”

“Because you have a prettier face than him? That ain’t breaking news.”

My lips twitched despite myself. “No, he got upset because I told him about you and me.”

I waited for Daire to clue in to what I was telling him. That Joey had not been happy at all to learn that I would be moving in with him now that my brother, Donovan, and his boyfriend, Kelly, were about to shack up.

“What the fuck are you talkin’ about? We aren’t—”

“Moving in together?” I cocked my head to the side. “It’s still okay for me to move in tomorrow, right?”

“Yeah, of course.” Daire blinked as though his brain was catching up with what I’d just said, then he sat forward to rest his hands on his knees, his eyes pinned to the marble floor. “You’re telling me that shithead laid his hands on you because you’re moving in with me?”

“I didn’t say that.”

Daire slowly turned his head, and his dark hair fell across his hooded eyes. “Prove it. Pull up your sleeve.”

“No, I—”

“Gavin, I’m not gonna touch you after whatever you’ve been through. But if you don’t pull up that fucking sleeve, so help me God…”

I reached for my sleeve and tugged it up my arm, and as five very distinctive reddish-purple welts came into view, Daire cursed and shot to his feet. I sucked in a sharp breath as he began to pace back and forth, muttering under his breath, and all I could think was thank God he couldn’t see my back. Hell, I couldn’t either, but I could feel the way it stung from my being thrown up against the bureau in Joey’s room.

“How long?” Daire bit out. His hands were fisted by his sides, his back to me as though he didn’t trust himself to look my way for the answer.

“Just this once,” I said quietly.

“Don’t lie to me.”

“I swear I’m not. This was the first and last time.” It was the truth, and something that still shocked me hours later. Joey had always leaned more on the mentally controlling side, and he’d never physically hurt me before. That wasn’t something I would endure with anyone, and I’d ended it right then and there. His surprise and hesitation when I said we were over gave me the time I needed to get the hell out of there and not look back.

I'd blocked his number. His email. Taken away guest privileges here at the Towers. There was no way he could get to me, so here I was safe.

But the way Daire's body vibrated with rage told me that Joey wasn't.

I got to my feet, but he was already turning around and heading for the door, like his mind was made up about something and he had a singular focus.

"What are you doing?" I said, and even I could hear the panic in my voice.

Daire didn't stop, and when I reached for him, his leather jacket slipped through my fingers.

"Daire, stop. You promised you wouldn't do anything."

"You're too good for that piece of shit," he muttered, coming to a stop to wait for the elevator doors to open.

"You're right. I am. That's why I broke up with him." I stepped in between him and the elevator, and when he wouldn't meet my eyes, I said, "Hey. Look at me."

The stubborn set of his stubble-lined jaw made me think he wouldn't, but then eyes so dark they were almost black looked down into mine.

"I told you this in confidence, which means this stays between us," I said. "It's been handled. I don't need you doing anything on my behalf, D. You promised."

He stared down at me and then cocked his head. "I know. I'm going up to the roof for a smoke."

The elevator dinged behind me, and I stepped aside so Daire could go in. For a second, I wondered if I should join him, but he wasn't the type of guy who wanted others around, and my presence might only piss him off more.

Daire pulled the pack of cigarettes out of his jeans pocket, and as the elevator doors began to close, he said, "You should go to your room. Get some sleep."

The doors closed, and I watched and waited to see which direction he was actually going. When the car did indeed go to the roof, I felt a weight leave my chest. Daire could be so unpredictable, and the last thing I wanted was for him to get involved in all this. But he seemed to be keeping his word, and if he wanted to cool off, literally, on the roof in the freezing, middle-of-the-night winter temps, then that was better than the alternative.

But Daire was right about one thing—I needed to get some rest and soak my body in a salt bath. Maybe then I'd be able to forget about what happened and put it all behind me.

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# TWO

## *daire*

THERE WASN'T A chance in hell I was letting that motherfucker get away with touching Gavin.

From the second I saw the tears on his face that he'd tried to convince me weren't there, my blood was boiling. It was instinctual, the need to protect him, and I didn't understand why rage hit me harder when it had to do with Gavin, but I didn't question it.

Especially not when I saw the evidence of Joey's hand on his arm.

Heading up to the roof to cool off and have a smoke was the excuse I made to Gavin, telling him exactly what he wanted to hear, because he wouldn't like what was really about to happen.

I may have promised not to kill his piece-of-shit ex, but that didn't mean I wouldn't make him *wish* he was dead.

Up on the roof, I made a few calls, not giving a damn how late it was. Wherever Joey was, that was where I would be.

It didn't take long before one of the bartenders at a club we frequented texted back, letting me know he'd seen Joey and a few others heading to an after-hours spot nearby.

How convenient—it was within walking distance of the Towers. Add in an audience, and my adrenaline was pumping. I was ready to get my hands on him.

Shoving my phone in my pocket, I headed to the elevator and then keyed in the code for the lobby.

Hopefully Gavin had listened and was already in bed, but if not… Well, that wasn't going to stop me. Batting those innocent eyes at me only went

so far, and I was past the point of reason now.

The second I stepped out of the Towers and back into the cold, I lit up a cigarette, not that I expected anything to tamp down my temper. I took in a deep inhale and blew it out as I headed south.

For months now I'd had to sit back and watch the disrespectful way Joey treated Gavin, and fight back the urge to put that piece of shit in his place. From the way he'd casually point out some random he'd like to fuck, or not bother to show up to a party because it was "too far" for him to travel, or that Gavin spent too much time with our group and not enough with Joey's dick squad.

Shit, the list went on and on, but I'd behaved myself because, for some unknown reason, Gavin had gotten a hard-on for this prick.

Tonight, that all changed.

The second I'd seen those marks, the minute Gavin confirmed what I already knew—that Joey had dared to touch him—my temper had been set to blow. There was no holding it back, no reining it in, and with each step I took I could feel the rage bubbling up inside of me.

I rounded the end of the block and spotted the twenty-four-hour alcohol soak-up spot with its lights still on and plenty of patrons inside, proving, as always, that this was the city that didn't sleep.

*Shouldn't be too hard to find Joey's ugly mug in the crowd inside.*

I flicked my cigarette to the ground and stomped it out with my booted heel, then pulled open the door and headed inside. It didn't matter that the sun would be up in a few hours—the place was still brimming with life as people scarfed down pancakes and bacon and threw back black coffees or Bloody Marys, anything to soak up or prolong the buzz.

I scanned the booths, my eyes drifting over anyone who didn't match Joey's description, until they skidded to a stop on the four guys at the far corner table. They were laughing and joking around with one another, being obnoxious as fuck for as early as it was—which, as it turned out, would work perfectly for what I had in mind.

Joey's back was to me. I could see his big, boxy head sitting on top of that thick neck of his as he stuffed his face with pancakes, and as I made my way up the aisle, I noted his other minions were so engrossed in their meals that they were completely oblivious to the wave of rage rushing their way.

It wasn't until I tapped Joey's shoulder, he turned in his seat, and my fist met his face that it clicked they were fucked—and by then, it was too late.

Joey cursed loudly as his fork went flying out of his hand and landed with a clang on the ground. He surged to his feet with a hand to his cheek, his eyes narrowing on me.

“Hurts more when you don’t see it comin’, doesn’t it?” I snarled.

Joey spat some blood onto the ground, and I was disappointed not to see a tooth.

“The fuck is your problem, asshole?”

“You think we wouldn’t see? That you could touch him and get away with it?”

He had the nerve to roll his eyes. “Ah, okay, so Gavin came and cried to you like a little bitch. Should’ve known he couldn’t keep our shit private.”

“You piece of shit.” I grabbed him by his fancy-ass shirt and jerked him in close, and this time he didn’t look so smug. In fact, I could’ve sworn I saw a flash of fear, and it made the savage beast inside me purr. The only thing that would make it better was if he pissed his pants.

Out of the corner of my eye I could see his friends all getting to their feet to help Joey out, but if they thought their odds were good at four to one, they’d soon find themselves shit out of luck.

“Take your hands off him,” I heard his friend Carl say.

“Like the way you took your hands off Gavin?” I said, my voice low and deadly. When Joey didn’t say anything, I tightened my hold on him and lifted him up so his toes barely brushed the floor.

“Stop.” He grabbed at my wrists and struggled against me, but I had him in a death lock. He wasn’t going anywhere unless I wanted him to.

“Is that what *he* said? Stop?” Fury blinded me, my jaw clenched so tight it was like it was wired shut. I couldn’t look at his face for another second without rearing my arm back to land another punch, this one aimed directly at his eye. Instead of the scream of pain I expected, the blow knocked the breath out of him, and I let go to let him drop onto the floor.

Someone rushed me from the side, but before Carl could get close, I shoved him so hard in the chest that he stumbled back and fell on his ass.

I refocused on Joey, who was on all fours and struggling to get up, but I wouldn’t let that happen. “How does it feel to be fucked with, huh?” I moved forward to kick him while he was down, but two security guards stepped between me and Joey, forcing me away from him.

“All right, break it up,” one of them said, giving Joey the space to finally get to his feet. The man pointed at me. “You need to leave.”

“I’m not the one pushing his boyfriend around like a coward,” I said. “Trust me, he deserves more.”

“*Ex*-boyfriend.” Joey spat more blood onto the floor. “Which I’m sure you’re happy about—”

“I don’t give two shits about whatever’s goin’ on here,” the security guard interrupted. “Shut it down or I’ll call the cops on both of you.”

A good look at Joey’s face told me he was gonna have a nice shiner tomorrow, but even that wasn’t enough.

Unfortunately, it would have to be for now. Though it was tempting to say fuck it and spend the night in jail.

“Yeah, get lost,” Joey said, feeling braver with a couple of big guys standing in front of him. “Run home to Gavin and let him cry on your shoulder.”

His words hit their mark, and I lunged again, forcing the guards to hold me back, but they forgot that Joey was behind them. He balled his fist, and I knew where this was going. And for some fucked-up reason, I wanted it. I wanted him to hit me, just to give me an excuse to break his goddamn nose.

Sure enough, with their backs turned, Joey reared back, and I smirked and stayed right where I was, welcoming the weak-ass punch when it landed. Because two seconds later I shoved the guards out of the way and hit Joey’s nose with such force that there was a satisfying crack when my fist made contact. Music to my fucking ears.

Blood spattered one of the security guards, who groaned, “What the hell, man,” and again, Joey hit his knees, holding both hands over his face.

I backed away, not even breathing hard as I watched the chaos unfold. Joey’s friends clambered over each other for napkins, thrusting them at Carl to deal with. When he had a handful, he rushed over and tried to help stop the blood pouring out of Joey’s nose.

The blood-spattered security guard looked at me and pointed at the door, and I held my hands up as I headed for the exit. But I was unable to resist looking at the aftermath over my shoulder.

“Can’t even blame him for that one. Dumbass.” The security guard shook his head at Joey and walked back to his station, like nothing had happened.

I felt the stares from the other diners, at least until I stepped back out into the cold, quiet night. My adrenaline was still pumping, but most of my

rage had gone into that last punch. It would have to be enough. I'd already broken my promise to Gavin by going after him, but then again, I hadn't killed him, had I? So maybe it didn't count.

Heading back north, I stretched my fingers, barely even feeling the effects from the blows, and then pulled out my pack of cigarettes. As I lit one up, I tried to tell myself I'd done enough, that the punishment equaled what he'd done to Gavin, but there was no way it would. It wasn't just anyone that had put his hands on him, but his boyfriend. Someone he trusted. Cared about. Someone he never thought would hurt him.

*That motherfucker…*

The turmoil that twisted my gut was enough to make me lose my shit again, but I forced myself to keep on walking.

Joey was done. It was over. He wouldn't be stupid enough to mess with Gavin again, and that needed to be enough. Putting him six feet under would only upset Gavin, so hopefully he'd see my "restraint" when he found out. Unless Joey decided to skip classes while his face healed, Gavin would see the damage sooner than later, but I wasn't handing over that information. I'd just tell him I'd kept my promise—half of it, anyway—and if Joey's pathetic punch showed up on my face, I'd tell him I ran into a cabinet door.

That shit was more believable anyway.

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# THREE

## *daire*

THIS SHIT WAS weird.

After spending the day moving Gavin's stuff into my apartment, it wasn't until now that I realized I'd actually be living in the same space as another human being.

I'd always been on my own for a reason—I liked it that way. No one else's shit to deal with, no one all up in my business. I eyed the empty boxes Gavin had thrown out into the main room while he unpacked for hours.

*No mess everywhere...*

So what had possessed me to say yes when he asked a few weeks ago if he could move in? Donovan and Kelly's love-fest was enough to gag anyone, let alone Gavin, so I understood why he'd want to get the hell out. But why here? Why with me? It wasn't like he couldn't get his own place if he wanted to. With rich parents, we all could.

"Hey," Gavin said as he stepped out of his room to throw another empty box onto the pile. When he caught me staring at the mess he was creating, he waved a hand. "Sorry, I know it's a mess, but I called downstairs and they said they'd send someone to break them down tomorrow."

Just one of the perks of living in an all-inclusive building on the Upper East Side—someone on call for every little thing you wanted. Hell, they would've moved Gavin's boxes themselves if he'd had the patience to wait until the weekend.

I raised a brow. "You're in a better mood." Earlier there'd been an irritated red tinge to his skin, and he'd snapped at most of the guys at least

once. But now he seemed almost content.

“Yeah, I guess I was annoyed about the furniture and then just having to move at all. I’m sorry. It didn’t have anything to do with you.”

I shrugged. “No problem.” It wasn’t like I wasn’t an ass on a daily basis.

He wiped the back of his hand over his forehead, looking proud, but tired. Even though the rest of the guys had helped move everything, Gavin hadn’t stopped all day. “So guess who just finished unpacking the last of his stuff? Well, at least until my furniture comes in.”

“Too bad,” I said, crossing my arms as I leaned back against the kitchen island. “I was about to see if you needed help.”

“Hah. Sure you were.”

“I was.”

“Well, if you really want to make yourself useful, you can go fold my underwear. I haven’t gotten to that yet.”

For some reason, the idea of getting my hands on something private of Gavin’s was hotter than it should’ve been. “You *fold* your underwear?”

“Don’t you?”

“Fuck no. I throw ’em in a drawer.”

Gavin chuckled as he grabbed a glass from the cabinet and filled it with water. “In case you missed it, I don’t have a dresser yet.”

“I’m aware.”

“Or a bed.”

“No shit.”

He drank most of his water before continuing, and his expression was a little too mischievous as he tapped his glass with his thumb. “Are you not gonna offer?”

“Offer what?”

“To let me sleep in your bed.”

I could only stare at him as I processed his question. He was *joking*, right? Gavin didn’t want to sleep with me—sleep in my bed. We were just friends, or friendly acquaintances, or whatever the hell we were that wasn’t a couple of guys sleeping together.

I mean, was he hot? Yeah, of course, but that didn’t mean I wanted to fuck him.

But just as *that* thought popped into my head, my dick woke up, letting me know it didn’t think that was a bad idea at all.

But it was. The worst thing in the world would be letting Gavin sleep in my bed.

A booming laugh exploded out of him as he set his glass on the counter. “I’m *kidding*. God, you look like I said I wanted to have your babies. It was a joke. It’s okay to smile if you think it was funny. I’ve seen you do it on occasion.”

My lips twitched despite myself, but that caused me to wince as my bruised cheek bunched.

“Ouch.” Gavin came around the counter and stopped opposite me, his eyes trailing over the purple tinge that had started to color my skin. “That looks so much worse than it did earlier. You really got that running into a cabinet door?”

“That’s what I told you, wasn’t it?”

“Well, yeah, but—”

“But what?”

“I just… I don’t know… It looks like you were in a fight, and I thought that maybe you’d gone after Joey even though—”

“You told me not to?”

“Yeah.” Gavin looked conflicted, as though he wasn’t quite sure what he wanted my response to be. But deep down, I knew what he wanted to hear. He would hate knowing any kind of fight had happened over him, even if that asshole deserved it. “Sooo, a cabinet?”

“Yeah, a cabinet.” The size of Joey’s fist. And that one pathetic punch he’d landed was actually starting to show. It had been easy to keep quiet with all our friends this afternoon, but it was getting harder and harder to deny what had really gone with every hour that passed.

“You really expect me to believe that?” Gavin moved closer to get a better look at my face. “That after what I told you about Joey, you suddenly show up the next day with a black eye but tell me you got it running into a cabinet door?” He shook his head. “How stupid do you think I am?”

He wasn’t stupid. Not at all. But if I admitted to hunting Joey down and breaking his face, Gavin would go postal, and for the first time in a while, he actually seemed to be back to his normal, joking self. So I lied.

“Do you really think Joey could get the better of me in a fight?”

Gavin’s gaze narrowed as he scanned my discolored eye, then he bit down into his lip. “No, but—”

“Exactly. So what’s with the Spanish Inquisition?”

He took in a breath then reluctantly nodded. “You’re right. You said you wouldn’t touch him, and I trust you. I’m just… Ignore me. It’s been a long day moving, and you know what? Maybe if you ice that it’ll be less noticeable tomorrow.”

Unlikely, but hey, if it made him feel better… “Sure, why not.”

Gavin grabbed an ice pack out of the freezer. “Really, D, next time, be more careful.” He gently pressed the pack to the side of my face. “You could’ve taken your eye out. And you have nice eyes.”

I closed said eye, not wanting to look into his or acknowledge his compliment, as the scent of his cologne drifted around me. Guilt twisted in my gut like a knife, because while Gavin might not buy my lame-ass cabinet door excuse, I knew I’d managed to convince him with the Joey-couldn’t-even-get-one-in angle. Even if I had *let* him get one in.

“Okay, now, you hold this here while I go make up the couch.” Gavin stepped around me and made his way to what was now *our* couch. In a pair of loose sweats and t-shirt, he looked casual and cozy, at home in his skin as he picked up the sheet and flicked it out across the leather. But when he bent down to stuff the edges, those loose sweats stretched nice and tight across his high, round ass.

*Jesus, since when have I looked at Gavin like* that*?* Apparently since the moment our friends walked out the door tonight and the two of us were deemed “roommates.” Or maybe it was just the fact we were stuck in a space together with sheets and pillows, that I was just now noticing his really nice—

“Daire?”

“Huh?”

“I just asked if you wanted to order any food—or I could make us an Irish coffee?”

The casual way he said *us* had my dick standing up ready to answer for me. But deciding to lead with the head on my shoulders instead of the one between my legs, I headed into the kitchen to grab the bottle of whiskey instead.

“Machine broke last week, so I’ll skip the coffee and just drink the whiskey. You want one?”

“Nah, I’m good.” Gavin plumped the pillow between his hands then tossed it at the end of the couch. “You might have a bad headache in the morning, though.”

I held up the shot glass. “That’s what this is for.”

The alcohol burned a fiery path down my throat, incinerating any guilt in its way, as I looked at Gavin, who’d curled his feet up under him on the couch.

How in the hell could anyone lay a hand on him in anger or otherwise? The thought infuriated me unlike anything I’d ever experienced, and I quickly downed another shot.

Shoving the bottle aside, I came out of the kitchen and stopped by the foot of the couch. “You sure you’re going to be okay out here?”

A small smile tugged at the corner of Gavin’s pink lips. “Why? You going to offer the other side of your bed after all?”

If I didn’t know better, I might’ve thought Gavin actually *wanted* to sleep in my damn bed. But that was ridiculous. He was clearly messing with me after what the guys had suggested earlier in the day.

“No. But I might get you another pillow.”

“So chivalrous. But I’ll be fine.” Gavin stretched his legs out and pulled the covers up over himself. “It won’t be for long, and this couch is pretty comfy.”

“Speak for yourself—my feet hang off the end.”

“Good thing I’m smaller than you, then, isn’t it?”

Gavin’s comment was innocent enough, but apparently my mind was on a one-way road tonight, because suddenly all I could think about was the way he’d fit perfectly in my arms as he rode my aching—

“D?”

I blinked Gavin back into focus, willing my cock to calm down. The last thing I needed was for him to see me with a raging hard-on his first night here. “Yeah?”

“Before I forget, thanks for letting me move in.”

I shrugged, hoping he didn’t look below my waist. “No problem.”

“I’ll see you in the morning?”

“And apparently every morning after that.”

Gavin chuckled and snuggled into his pillow. “You don’t have to sound so horrified about it.”

I grunted but didn’t respond as I headed to my room, because *horrified* was the last thing I felt about Gavin moving in—and I had no fucking clue what to do with that.

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# FOUR

## *gavin*

"SO HOW WAS it waking up in Daire's bed?" Travis said as our driver, Scotty, drove us to Astor the next morning.

Normally, I'd have more to say to that, since Travis was only trying to provoke, something he excelled at. But I was too busy trying to read the description of the espresso machine I'd pulled up on my phone to care. "I slept on the couch."

Travis gasped. "Daire. You made sweet Gavin sleep on the *couch*?"

"Better than the floor," Daire replied, and it made me smirk.

It *had* been a little strange waking up somewhere new, but it was a relief not to wake up to bumping, grinding, moans, and God knew whatever else. All I'd heard was the faint sound of Daire's shower running when I woke up, and that was something I could definitely live with.

*…this machine textures the milk to your specifications and creates a foam so silky it's perfect for latte art…*

Ooh, latte art sounded fun. Then again, I doubted Daire would care about getting a heart drawn on his coffee.

I swiped to the next espresso machine, hated the color of it, then moved on to the next.

*Excellent reviews… Forty hot and cold brew specialties…*

Yep, this was the one.

"Hey, East, hope you don't mind getting your hair wet," West said as the Sprinter came to a stop.

As the door opened, I glanced up to see the snow was coming down even heavier now. I tucked my phone into my jacket for the moment and

made the freezing trek into Astor with the rest of the guys, barely listening to whatever they were saying. The second I was inside, I pulled my phone back out and kept reading the reviews of the machine I wanted to buy Daire. He'd mentioned his espresso maker had broken, and that wasn't something either of us could live without, so I figured—why not get him a new one as a "thanks for letting me move in" gift?

I could even wrap it in a big red bow—

No, he'd hate that. He'd probably already hate my buying him anything, but too bad.

Without any more hesitation, I clicked add to cart and quickly filled in my information, putting Daire's name on the shipping address.

I smiled to myself and hit buy, and as the purchase went through, I heard Travis say, "Fuckin' hell."

It didn't occur to me to ask what he was talking about, since they'd all been shooting the shit since we got out of the Sprinter. It wasn't until I almost ran into Travis where he'd stopped abruptly that I bothered looking up.

Everyone had gone silent and was staring in the direction of a group I knew all too well and had hoped to avoid. When my eyes caught on Joey's face, though, I gasped and almost dropped my phone.

"Joey?" Horror filled me as I stared at the twisted direction of his nose, and his right eye that was the same gruesome shade of purplish-black that Daire's was.

*Holy…shit.*

No. Daire wouldn't have done this. He couldn't have done this. He told me last night he hadn't.

I stepped away from our group, closer to the tight circle gathered around Joey. "What happened to you?"

A cruel smile twisted the lips I'd once kissed as Joey narrowed his swollen eyes on me. "You know exactly what."

I shook my head, disbelief filling me as the evidence in front of me pointed to one thing and one thing only. But still, I refused to believe it. I'd sat with Daire last night, given him an ice pack as he assured me someone like Joey couldn't possibly have gotten a hit on him.

"I… No. What are you—"

"Save it, slut," Carl snarled. "We know you sent him."

The horror I'd felt seconds ago got swallowed up by an uncontrollable anger as I spun around to Daire.

This was the last thing I'd wanted, the last thing I needed, and as the bitter taste of betrayal and humiliation crashed over me, the pain felt far worse than anything Joey had done to me.

"You did this?" My body practically vibrated as everyone else in the hall vanished from view and I aimed all of my emotion in Daire's direction.

"He—"

"*Did you do this?*" My voice was unrecognizable as I cut Daire off, not wanting to hear any more excuses. How stupid was I to think he'd actually keep his promise? How naïve? I felt like a complete fool, and now everyone at Astor would think I was too weak to stand up for myself. "Un-fucking-believable."

I shoved past the rest of our group until I was toe to toe with Daire, my chest heaving with barely contained fury as I glared up at him.

"You promised."

Daire's dark eyes seemed to map every corner of my face before coming back to land on mine. "I lied."

Something snapped in me. Those two words were so easy for him to say and so fucking painful for me to hear. Before I knew it, I shoved him as hard as I could in the chest.

Daire stumbled back a couple of steps, the force of my anger catching him off guard. But instead of apologizing, he angled his chin up in stony defiance.

Great. That was just great. The one person I'd trusted turned out to be the last person I should've.

I could feel the eyes of everyone on my back. The silence in the hall was deafening, and all I wanted to do was disappear.

So that was exactly what I was going to do.

I stormed past Daire without a second glance, and as I made a beeline for the exit, I could've sworn I heard Joey say, "Good luck fucking him now," and that ache in my stomach returned with a vengeance.

I should've known. I should've known better than to believe anything that came out of Daire's mouth. He was a selfish bastard—he was the first to admit that. So why hadn't I trusted my instincts last night when it came to that damn bruise on his face?

*Because you trusted him,* an annoying voice chimed in inside my head.

Yeah, fat lot of good that had done. Cabinet door, my ass. It was clear as the broken nose on Joey's face that Daire had gone after him, tracked him down when I'd specifically asked him not to, and for what? Not *me*. For himself. And now everyone in our group—hell, the school—knew what had happened, or could at least guess.

This was the exact thing I'd wanted to avoid—a public showdown between my friends and Joey's. But thanks to Daire, my breakup was now up for public discussion. Not to mention the reason why.

I ducked into one of the small alcoves away from the rest of the students making their way to class and clutched my bag to my chest, as the anger and humiliation turned to a bone-deep disappointment.

I'd woken up happy this morning, something I thought was next to impossible with the way my week had been going. But after last night and the easy connection I'd felt with Daire, I'd really thought that things were about to turn around for me. That I'd be able to start over in a new space, free of Joey, and finally be able to come into my own.

I could kiss that goodbye now. Daire had completely shattered my trust and made things with Joey a million times worse, because now he thought I'd ratted him out to my friends.

All I'd wanted to do was move on. I'd handled things, was ready to forget that one horrible night, and now, thanks to Daire, it had all come crashing back in.

*Ding!*

I pulled my phone out of my pocket, hoping against all hope that news hadn't traveled that fast through the halls of Astor. But no, what I saw was almost worse. It was confirmation for the espresso machine I'd just ordered for Daire. The thank-you gift for him being so awesome and helping me out.

But now as I stared at it, all I felt was the bitterness of betrayal, the hurt of being lied to by the one person I'd trusted with my secret, and I couldn't help but think how, in the blink of an eye, everything had changed.

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# FIVE

## *gavin*

Present Day - Late March

THE WIND WHIPPED loudly against my window as a storm raged outside. Being on the forty-fourth floor only intensified the sound, but in a way it was comforting, like white noise, as I stared aimlessly out at the city skyline.

Tonight was no different than any other night, not really. The guys had all gone out to party it up somewhere, and I had once again made an excuse to stay behind. I was getting good at that. But it was easier than spending the night surrounded by happy, lovesick couples and actively avoiding the only person I would've normally stuck close to—Daire.

I sighed and stared at the rain-streaked glass, the buildings blurring in the distance, and couldn't help but compare it to the life I'd had months ago. It was like a distorted memory now. One where I'd had a boyfriend, lived with my brother, and had a really great group of friends. Before things had gone sour with Joey, I was happy…or so I thought.

But now? Now my life looked extremely different.

I was single, not as close to my brother as I used to be, and, unbeknownst to Daire or my friends, still dealing with the aftermath of my breakup with Joey. Daire's actions had only managed to give me a week or two of reprieve before Joey and his friends had started harassing me between classes. Nothing physical, but enough to make me dread the interaction and hope it passed soon.

Then there was the fact that I was living with a guy I barely said two words to anymore. That fateful day in December—that day when I realized the one person I'd trusted with my deepest, darkest secret lied to me—had turned my world on its axis, driven a wedge between us that I hadn't been able to get past.

How could I, when the person who had done it had the emotional capacity of a brick wall? Daire wasn't the kind to talk things out, to tell me why he'd done what he'd done. He offered no explanation for any of the actions he took, and gave no fucks.

The one thing he did know how to do was shut down. He knew how to block people out. To him, my silence was probably welcome. So I'd let it go. We existed in our apartment like two strangers.

It was…exhausting. *I* was exhausted, always worrying if I'd run into him. Wondering what to say. I just wanted one thing in my life to go back to normal. I wanted to go back to when he'd at least grunt an acknowledgment my way.

That wasn't going to happen, though, not unless we cleared the air. Something I knew that *I* was going to have to initiate. For all I knew, Daire thought everything was cool with us. He'd always lived alone, so maybe this was him in his natural state. Silent and…well, silent.

The sound of the front door opening and booted feet striding through the house told me Daire was home for the night. From my open door I could see his shadow on the wall as he headed toward his room at the far end of our place, away from mine. It served us both well, each having our own "wings" of the expansive two-bedroom residence at the Towers. If this had been the layout when I was living with Donovan, maybe I wouldn't have had to move out.

On second thought, he and Kelly's bedroom behavior was loud enough to annoy the neighbors, so this was a good change.

At least, it would've been if it wasn't so tense. I could feel it in the air, thick and suffocating. Something had to give.

I picked my laptop up off the bed and set it aside. It was late, and I needed to get sleep more than I needed to get ahead on any assignments. I went to shut my door, but the sound of Daire's opening again made me pause. From where I stood, I could see that he'd changed, not into something to sleep in, but into a different pair of jeans with a sleeveless shirt. He carried his leather jacket as he walked toward the kitchen, but he

went out of view, and I could only hear him pour something. When he appeared again, heading for the door, he'd thrown on the jacket, and I frowned.

He was going back out again. Where, though?

This wasn't the first or even fifth time I'd caught him leaving in the middle of the night, not returning until the early-morning hours.

Where was he going? And why was he keeping it a secret? None of the guys had said anything, and if they had even a hint of a suspected booty call, they would never let Daire hear the end of it.

So it was probably smart that this wasn't group knowledge. Or even mine.

As the front door clicked shut, I decided to keep my own cracked open a little so I could hear when he got home. Not because I was keeping tabs on him or anything. Just to make sure he made it home okay.

I settled into my bed and flipped off the lamp, but as darkness descended, my mind was far too awake. A crash of thunder shook my window, and I determined Daire was crazy for going back out in this weather.

The man was an enigma. Living with him for more than three months hadn't told me much about him at all. I knew the way he took his coffee. That he snuck in and out of the apartment like a thief in the night. That he was most stubborn man I'd ever met.

I knew all that, and still, for some annoying reason, I found myself curious about him. I wanted to know why he was the way he was, not just the superficial stuff.

It was obvious Daire preferred his own company to anyone else's, but that wasn't me…at all. This silent treatment was driving me crazy. I would rather argue than be ignored, which meant I was gonna have to be the one to suck it up and break the ice.

How? I had no idea.

That was a problem for tomorrow.

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# SIX

## *daire*

FUCK ME, I needed coffee.

The closed black curtains covering my bedroom windows didn't prepare me for the eye blasting I got when I stepped into the living room early Friday morning. It was too bright. Too sunny. Too much.

Especially when I'd only slept for three hours, if that.

It was worth it, though. I'd needed the release and to escape for a while, and that was exactly what I'd gotten. The ache in my muscles was welcome proof of that.

I grabbed a mug out of the cabinet and turned on the espresso machine, flipping through the preset options until I got to my setting. I hit the grind button and as the machine started to whir, I stared at the tiled wall of the kitchen. The welcome scent of ground coffee filled the air, and the second it finished, I tamped that shit and set it to brew.

The machine had been a thank-you gift from Gavin, complete with a big red bow, but by the time it arrived, he kinda hated my guts.

He'd done good, though. This thing made a coffee that was better than the shop downstairs. I'd thought about not using it when it arrived, but I needed the caffeine hit more than I needed to prove a point.

As the coffee streamed into my travel mug, Gavin's door swung open, and out of the corner of my eye I saw his platinum-blond head move in my direction. As usual, he didn't say anything as he opened the fridge and took out the pre-made breakfast he always had sent up from one of the restaurants downstairs.

I didn’t need to glance his way to know every step that would happen next. He’d stand at the edge of the kitchen island opposite me, tear off the lid of his container, salt and pepper his hard-boiled eggs. But he never ate those first. He always started with the sliced fruit or grapes, finishing those off before popping the cubes of cheese and turkey into his mouth. The eggs would come last, and he never bothered using a fork, just picking them up with his hand before licking his fingers clean.

Not that I watched him. I didn’t need to, not when we both had a morning routine we stuck to no matter what. Not to mention, we weren’t exactly on speaking terms, and hadn’t been since the blowup at Astor. That wasn’t my fault. If Gavin wanted to hold a grudge, then that was his problem. I wasn’t apologizing for a damn thing.

I kept my eyes on my coffee as it finished brewing, and then grabbed my mug and moved out of the way so that when Gavin tossed his empty container, he could take my spot in front of the machine.

We were like opposing magnets in that way, never getting too close, staying out of each other’s way. With anyone else, I’d be fine with it. Better than fine. I liked my space, and I hated bullshit small talk.

But this tension with Gavin was starting to grate on my nerves. I’d thought I could hold a grudge. That was nothing compared to Gavin Truitt icing someone out.

I didn’t bother with breakfast, just leaned back against the island and waited for him to finish up so we could head down to the Sprinter. Even not talking, it never occurred to me to not go downstairs without him. After all, *I* wasn’t the one being a jackass.

Gavin’s fingers drumming along the counter caught my attention. His back was to me, a rigid set to his shoulders that wasn’t usually there.

Narrowing my eyes, I studied his long, lean frame while he wasn’t looking my way. His white collared shirt was tucked in at the slim waist of his fitted blue plaid designer pants, and I tried to ignore the way they hugged his ass.

Gavin wasn’t my type. He was too good, too pretty, too innocent.

That didn’t mean I couldn’t appreciate a hot ass when I saw one.

He turned around suddenly and met my eyes. It was the first time in a long time he’d looked at me directly, and I wondered what that meant. Was he finally over his shit? I didn’t need a thanks-for-kicking-my-ex’s-ass apology, but I’d take it reluctantly if it was offered.

“Where did you go last night?”

That wasn’t at all what I thought would come out of Gavin’s mouth after months of not talking. I didn’t react, taking a sip of my coffee instead. He already knew the answer. He’d been invited to go out with us to the club and turned it down.

When it was clear I wasn’t saying a word, he sighed and headed toward the refrigerator to pull out a half-gallon of milk.

“You’ve done it a few times now,” he said, uncapping the jug. “Gone out with the guys, come back, then left again.”

Gavin had been watching me? What the hell?

“You keepin’ tabs on me now?”

His hand froze mid-pour as he glanced back at me.

*Huh, that’s two times in one day. Guess I* am *off his shitlist.*

“No, I’m not keeping— Damn it.” He spun back to his mug, where the milk and coffee had spilled over onto the counter, and quickly put the container down, reaching for some paper towels. He mopped up the mess in front of him, and as he crouched down to get the overspill at his feet, he let out a sigh. “I just heard the door, that’s all.”

Gavin shook his head and straightened, tossing the soaked towels in the trash.

“Why are you always so damn defensive?”

“*I’m* defensive.” I grunted and pulled out my cell. “That’s rich, coming from you.”

“Excuse me?”

What was his deal this morning? What happened to the awkward silence? I could handle that. But I didn’t do verbal pissing matches. Why bother when it was easier to use your fists and end it with one quick punch?

But it wasn’t like I was going to do that to Gavin. Hell no. Not when a strong wind could knock him off his feet.

So if he wanted to go a couple rounds in the verbal ring, I guess I needed to start using my words.

“You’ve been nothing but defensive for months.”

“No, I—”

“With Van, the guys, with me. You’ve got a stick up your ass, and you know it.”

Gavin’s jaw practically hit the floor he’d just been mopping up.

“Are you serious right now? Van and I are…fine, and I have not been defensive with the guys. As for you—” His words cut off as I crossed my arms, but he quickly regained his footing. “You know exactly why I’ve been the way I’ve been.”

“Defensive.”

“Would you stop saying that?”

“Pissed off.”

“I’m not pissed off.”

“A surlier fuck than me.”

Gavin opened his mouth as though about to fire back, but at the last second it clicked shut. A small hint of a smile curled his lip.

“Is that even possible?”

“I wouldn’t have thought so, but what do I know.”

Gavin let out a breath and leaned back against the counter, then he slipped his hands into his pockets, making the tight fit of his pants even tighter—not that I noticed.

“I don’t want to be like that.” His voice was soft, his eyes on the floor, and I wasn’t sure if he was talking to me or himself until he looked over at me.

“Then don’t be.”

“Just like that, huh?”

“I mean, you control you. You don’t want to be a shit. Don’t be one.”

A frown formed on the smooth skin of his forehead. “So what you’re saying is, you act like a shit because you want to.”

I shrugged, not about to get into my behavior. We were talking about him, not me. The last thing I needed was for Gavin to start psychoanalyzing me.

“I’m just tellin’ it like it is. And you’ve been a shit. Ask anyone.”

Gavin scoffed. “Why bother? Pretty sure no one is as brutal as you.”

“Just being honest.”

“Right. *Well*.” Gavin ran a hand through his hair. “I wasn’t keeping tabs on you or trying to be nosy about last night. I was just going to say that if you’re seeing someone and want to bring them back here, you should. You don’t have to always go to them.”

Seeing someone? What the fuck was he talking about?

“I get the need for a late-night booty call, and I can keep a secret if that’s what you want.”

He thought I was going out at night to get my rocks off? I mean, yeah, I was definitely going out to relieve frustration. To pound away on someone and let off some steam. But seeing someone? No.

"Daire?"

"You makin' another coffee?" I asked.

"Uh…" Gavin glanced at his half-empty mug then back at me. "No. It'll make us late."

I nodded, picked up my own coffee, and started for the door. I could hear Gavin behind me grabbing his bag and hurrying out of the apartment as I swiped the key card under the keypad nearby.

"You didn't answer me back there."

I eyed Gavin as he slung the strap of his bag over his head. "No. I didn't."

"So you aren't seeing anyone?"

The elevator door slid open, and I stepped inside, not about to get into this. I didn't do gossip and I didn't make idle chitchat. Something he must've forgotten in the handful of months he'd decided to avoid all talk.

"Hello?" he said again, and I turned around and pinned him with a sharp look.

"It's none of your business where I go or what I do. Got it?"

Gavin's mouth snapped shut, and he gave a curt nod before stepping to the opposite side of the elevator. The muscle in his jaw twitched as he stared at the closed door and crossed his arms, and for the briefest flicker of a moment, I felt like a dick.

But hey, that had shut him up. He wouldn't be asking any more questions now, and whatever small progress we'd made by speaking had only made things even more contentious.

That was my gift. Spreading friction wherever I went.

The tension between us only grew as we descended, and when the doors opened, Gavin practically jumped out to get away from me.

Good. Maybe then he'd stop watching me. The last thing I needed was for him or any of the guys to figure out where I spent my time after hours.

I took my time walking out to the Sprinter, sipping on my coffee and watching Gavin climb into the full van. We were the last ones this morning, but it didn't matter. Scotty would get us wherever we needed to go on time. While my gift was being an asshole, Scotty's was speed.

As I figured, Gavin had taken up a spot near the back, so I did us both a favor and planted my ass toward the front.

“Jesus, Daire, don’t hurry on our account,” West said from where he sat beside his roommate, East. “We’re more than happy to wait for when *you’re* ready.”

“Fuck off.”

East’s brows hit his hairline as he looked between me and Gavin. “Trouble in the arctic this morning?”

I leveled him with my frostiest look, and a devious curl turned up East’s lips.

“I’m sorry, but whenever you two arrive, it’s like a blast of cold air rushes by.” He fake shivered. “So icy.”

“I *said* shut the fuck up.”

East scanned the rest of the group then settled back in his seat, mouth shut. Not much worked on his loud mouth, but apparently my scowl and reputation were enough to keep his lips zipped.

Seemed like I was the surliest one after all.

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# SEVEN

## *gavin*

I LET OUT a low whistle as I stepped out of the limo dropping us off at Chelsea Piers Saturday night. It was clear which mega-yacht was our destination—the one Archer Carrington's company had rented out for the evening was the largest one by far, lit up in purple lights, and already boasting a huge crowd on all four levels, popping bottles of champagne and dancing to the music that pulsed through the air.

"Now *this* is why you date an older man," I said, buttoning my suit jacket. "Preston had the right idea."

"So we need to watch out for you hitting on *our* dads now, is that what you're saying?" West smirked as he linked his fingers through his boyfriend JT's.

"Don't worry," I said as my eyes drifted to the limo, where Daire was climbing out. "I only like older guys within a five-year range, not twenty. Your dad's safe from me."

"Thank God for that. I'd hate to have to kill you."

Daire brushed by me, heading down the pier, and I couldn't help but watch his broad shoulders as he walked away. It wasn't often Daire dressed up in a suit, but there was a strict dress code for the event tonight. As much as I didn't want to admit it, since he'd been a tight-lipped jerk yesterday, Daire looked good. Really, really good.

No point in telling him that. He'd only flip me off for "watching him."

My attempt at an icebreaker had failed miserably. If anything, it had only served to make things even frostier between us.

Let's hope we didn't go down tonight like the *Titanic*.

“Hey!” Preston’s voice carried from where he stood on the other side of the ramp with an iPad in hand. “About time you guys showed up. We were about to leave without you.”

“Oh please, we *are* the party,” East said, stepping on board the yacht first. “Well, all of us except Daire.”

Daire eyed East and then the rail, and for a second I wondered if he was going to toss his ass over it.

Deciding to save East’s ass, I stepped in between them. “What he meant to say is ‘cool party, where are the martinis?’”

Preston gestured to East. “Go straight—”

“Is that even possible for East?” Travis murmured, and Preston scoffed.

“—and the main bar has an overflow of olives just for you.” Preston shot him a wink. “You’re welcome.”

As East led the group off towards the bar, Preston leaned in to me and Daire and grinned. “But if you want the real good stuff, it’s up a level.”

“Thanks for the heads-up,” I said.

“Of course. I’m going to go find Archer and let him know that everyone’s on board and we can get moving, but I’ll come find you later.”

“Sounds good.”

Preston gave us a quick wave then headed off to track down his boyfriend. Despite their massive age gap, they seemed to be weathering things better than expected, especially now that Preston had joined the team at his boyfriend’s company, CTA—Carrington Talent Agency.

“So, want to go get a drink?” I said when it was clear Daire wasn’t about to offer. His shrug was about as good a confirmation as I was going to get, and as I led us up a floor, I could’ve sworn I felt his eyes on me.

The yacht had just set sail as we made it to the bar, and when the bartender stopped in front of us, Daire shocked the shit of me by ordering “two shots of your best tequila and a gin and dubonnet.”

*Daire knows what I drink? Huh, guess I’m not the only one who watches.*

I wasn’t going to call him out, though. He’d only get defensive, and that would get us nowhere.

“So,” I said as the bartender slid our drinks to us. “What did Preston bribe you with to get you in that suit?”

Daire smirked. “Not Preston. Archer.” He opened his suit jacket, where a couple of Cuban cigars were neatly stashed in his inner pocket.

I laughed, despite myself. “*Archer* gave you those?”

“Yep. Hell, maybe I should be the one dating an older guy.”

When I scrunched up my nose, Daire noticed.

“What?”

“I don’t see you dating an older guy.”

He waited for a reason, then, when I didn’t answer, added, “Because?”

“You’re a little too alpha for that.”

“Probably.” Daire threw back one of his shots, and my gaze fell to the way his Adam’s apple moved as he swallowed. I had the insane thought of wondering what his tanned skin would feel like under my lips. “Do you like that?”

I blinked, dragging my eyes back up to Daire’s, confused by the question. “Do I like the idea of dating an older guy?”

Daire shook his head and reached for his second shot. “Forget it.”

I shrugged, then turned to face the dance floor where people had started to gather, the music throbbing through the speakers in time with the flashing lights. As the song mixed into a faster one, I felt the urge to go join in.

“I love this song.” I took a long draw of my drink, my hips already swaying. Daire watched me, a silent but overwhelming presence as he rested an elbow on the bar. Something about him made me want to grab him by the lapels and drag him out onto the dance floor.

Maybe I’d ask first.

“Want to join me?” I said, inclining my head toward the crowd.

“No.”

Even though I’d known that would be the answer, the immediate rejection still stung. “Why not?”

“You know I don’t dance.”

“Oh, come on, you can make an exception.”

“I said no,” he snapped.

I held a palm up. “Okay. Then excuse me while I go find someone who will.”

Jesus, I was in a constant state of whiplash dealing with this guy. One minute he was hot, then he was cold. I never knew where I stood. But for now, I was happy to go and stand somewhere else.

I DIDN’T KNOW how long I’d been out on the dance floor. An hour? Two? And never left wanting for a partner, even as Daire brooded near the bow of the boat. I’d catch myself looking his way every now and then to see him staring out into the city lights as the yacht sailed up the river. It didn’t surprise me he’d chosen a spot away from the rest of the crowd—that was the way he liked it. A lone island, even in a sea of people. That was Daire.

It’d always fascinated me, that someone as closed off and uncaring of status or social climbing as he had ended up in our crowd. In all fairness, he’d been part of the group even before I came along. But when I did finally show up, I’d felt a strange sort of solidarity with the introvert of the group. Neither of us had really fit in. We were just there because of circumstances, even if I didn’t know what his were.

But whatever kinship I’d had with him felt strained now. I was trying to move on, though. I’d tried to offer an olive branch yesterday, but in usual Daire fashion, he’d snapped it clean in half and continued to do so every time I made an effort.

He was such an ass.

“Excuse me.”

I turned to see a gorgeous guy in a perfectly fitted tux with sparkling green eyes glittering at me.

“Hi. I hope I’m not interrupting, but I saw you standing over here and have been waiting for you to finish that glass so I could maybe offer to get you a new one.”

“Oh.” I looked at my now-empty cocktail glass. I hadn’t even realized I’d been drinking it while looking over at—

“I’m Trevor.” He held out a hand, a wide smile making a dimple flash at me, and my brain might’ve melted.

“Hi, um, I’m Gavin.” I slipped my hand into his, and as his fingers closed around mine, I swallowed.

“So, Gavin, can I get you that drink?”

*Hell yes, you can.* But I played it cool. “That would be great, thanks.”

“Don’t go anywhere.” He winked before heading off through the crowd, and I shivered. It was still a little chilly out on the water, but the alcohol would warm me up in no time. Or maybe Trevor could. Because damn, he was hot, and somehow I’d gotten his attention.

“Here you go,” he said, handing me another fruity concoction. “The waiter called it a Sex on a Yacht, which I’m assuming is a take on a Sex on

the Beach."

"Well, that's one way to break the ice." I gave him a flirty smile and lowered my mouth over my drink. "But I barely know you."

Trevor's eyes instantly heated, and he shook his head. "I'm an open book. Tell me what you want to know, and I'll give it to you."

Now that was what I wanted to hear. This night was going to more than make up for the past few shitty months, I could feel it.

"Hmm." I swirled the contents of my glass with my straw. "You could start by telling me how you scored an invite tonight."

"Easy enough. I'm a client of Archer's. You?"

"He's dating a friend of mine."

"Oh, you're one of those Park Avenue guys." When I raised a brow, he said, "I heard all about what went down when another agency tried to poach me after the scandal."

Damn, we got around. Not exactly surprising, since I knew our pictures showed up in the gossip sections of New York newspapers, but this guy being a client of CTA, the top theatrical agency in the country, meant he had to be good at what he did. Archer's reputation proved he was selective as hell.

I glanced around at the hundreds of people on every level of the yacht and smirked. "Yeah, it doesn't look like Archer choosing to be with Preston has affected his clientele."

"Hell no. He's the best. Scored me a back-end percentage on my last movie, which is practically unheard of. Like I care who he's dating."

My ears perked up. "So you're an actor?" When he nodded, I tilted my head, looking him over again for any sign of familiarity. "What have I seen you in?"

"*Closeout*. *Hiding in the Shadows*. But my big break was a show I've been doing down in Wilmington for the past few years. *Half-Moon Bay*."

*Oh shit.* Those were all titles I'd heard of, but considering I didn't watch much TV, I hadn't seen him on there. That would need to change. ASAP.

"I didn't know I was talking to a movie star, Trevor. What are you doing bringing *me* drinks?" I teased.

He laughed and ran his hand through his wind-swept hair. "Hoping to get a date?"

"Well, I don't know. That depends…"

"On?"

I threw back the rest of my drink and set the empty glass aside. “On how good you are on the dance floor.”

A sexy smile curved his lips as I grabbed the lapel of his jacket and pulled him toward where others had gathered to dance in front of the DJ. With a buzz starting to flood through me, and the attention of a Hollywood heartthrob directed on me, I was feeling so good I couldn’t remember why I hadn’t been lately.

As I danced, I threw my head back and stared up at the twinkling stars, feeling free.

Free of judgment.

Free of anything other than this moment right here.

Trevor wound an arm around my waist and pulled me in close, and as he spun me around, a burst of laughter left me. Then my eyes caught on the lone figure standing off to the side.

Daire was exactly where he had been earlier, but instead of facing away from the crowd, he was now staring right into it. Or, should I say, staring right at me.

He had a drink in one hand and one of the cigars in the other, and the scowl on his face was the complete opposite of the smile on mine. I had no idea what could’ve put it there. He was on one of the most spectacular yachts I’d ever seen, sailing down the Hudson River, and still he couldn’t seem to find any kind of joy.

Oh well—he didn’t want me watching him, talking to him, having anything to do with him, so that was on him. I was determined to have a good time, and not even Daire and his scowl could ruin that.

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# EIGHT

## *daire*

I GLANCED AT the time. Almost midnight.

I'd been debating whether I wanted to go back out tonight, and the irritation that still chafed my insides all day was answer enough. I didn't even know the source of the frustration, only that it was there, and I wanted it to get the fuck out.

So going back out it was.

Heading to the bar in the kitchen, I scanned the bottles of liquor and decided against the smooth vodka in favor of something that burned. No need for a shot glass—I took a couple of swallows of the cheap tequila straight from the bottle and closed my eyes as fire scorched my throat.

Perfect.

I stood there, relishing the feel as dead silence surrounded me. So damn quiet. I'd always enjoyed it before, but now it only meant one thing: Gavin wasn't home.

When I opened my eyes, they landed on his closed bedroom door. He'd gone out with the actor prick he'd met on the yacht last night, and the fact that it'd been hours and he was still gone meant it was probably going well.

It was annoying as shit that I even cared that he kept dating these losers. He was better off alone. Like me. 'Cause I was such a fucking joy to be around.

Tearing my eyes away, I set the bottle back on the bar and headed to my room to change. Already I could feel the heat from the tequila warming my body, getting me ready for what was ahead. The cheap shit always gave me a headache the next day, but it served its purpose for now. East would have

a shit fit if he knew I kept a bottle worth under a hundred bucks in my apartment. Next time he was over, I'd have to offer him a glass so he could stroke out.

I pulled off my shirt and pants, tossing them in the direction of the hamper and not caring that I missed. Then I threw on a worn pair of jeans and rummaged through my drawers for something I didn't care about fucking up.

The sound of the front door opening and shutting had me pausing. I didn't hear the sound of laughter or voices, which meant Gavin hadn't brought the guy home with him. Unless he was just a really quiet one, and if that were the case, I felt sorry for Gavin.

I yanked a faded shirt from the drawer as a knock sounded on my door.

That was a first. We barely talked anymore, and now he was venturing over to my side of the house?

"What?" I said, shoving the drawer shut with my hip.

The door opened suddenly, and I spun around to see Gavin standing there, still perfectly put together in a grey blazer that matched his eyes. His gaze traveled over my half-naked body, and the moment his eyes widened, I knew exactly what he was seeing.

"Did I say come in?" I snapped, throwing on the shirt.

"I…" Gavin swallowed and then looked up at me. "I just got home and… Wait, are you going out? Now?"

"That a problem?"

"Well…no. I just thought—"

"What?"

"Nothing." Gavin shook his head and turned as though he were about to leave but then stopped suddenly and looked back at me. "Why do you do that?"

*Here we fucking go.* "Do what?"

"Act like such a dick. You said the other night I was being defensive—well, who do you think I learned that from?"

I grabbed my key card, my phone, and my cigarettes, shoving them deep in my pocket. To hell with anything else. This was the last thing I'd wanted tonight, to go head to head with Gavin. But it seemed he was hellbent on giving me a piece of his mind.

"I've been trying to get us back on some kind of common ground this past week, and you're making it impossible."

I crossed over to my door and stopped opposite him. But in true Gavin form, he didn't back down. Not from my glare, not from my towering over him. No, that brave fucker angled his chin up a fraction higher and all but dared me to give it my best shot.

It was impressive, really. If I was the type to be impressed.

"You ever heard of an apology?"

Gavin blinked as I crossed my arms.

"Yeah, didn't think so." I shoved past him and through the living room.

"An apology? For what?"

There weren't too many people in this world that I bothered with, and even fewer that I cared about. But Gavin was one of them. So if he wanted an explanation, he was gonna fucking get one.

I looked back at where he stood in the middle of our living room. "How about for punishing me for the last few months when I did you a goddamn favor?"

"A favor?" Gavin's eyes widened to the size of saucers. "You're talking about Joey?"

My glare must've been answer enough, because he scoffed and took a step toward me.

"You practically broke his face."

"Just his nose." My lip curled at the side as I remembered the satisfying crunch when I landed that punch. "And you should be thanking me for that."

"Thanking you?" Gavin shook his head, disbelief written all over his face. "Oh, we're gonna have this out now? How about I specifically asked you *not* to do anything to him. Not to make matters worse. And what did you do? You beat the hell out of him. I asked you not to touch him, and you promised me you wouldn't."

I strode across the space separating us until we were toe to toe, and Gavin had to angle his head back to meet my stare.

"I promised not to kill him," I growled. "And I didn't. Something I regret every time I think about him touching you. Now, are we done?"

Gavin's pale pink lips parted. "Daire, I—"

"*Are we done?*" My voice was low, a dangerous kind of contained fury that even Gavin seemed to recognize. The frustration gnawing at me was enhanced by the blinding rage I felt whenever I thought of that ass-face Joey laying his hands on Gavin.

“Y…yeah, okay, we’re done.”

“Good.” I spun around and stormed out of the apartment, needing to get away from him. I didn’t want Gavin to see this side of me, didn’t want to take my frustration out on him. But tonight he wouldn’t let it go. He’d just kept pushing and pushing until I snapped.

He wanted us to go back to “normal”? So did I. But the only way we could do that was if he stopped punishing me for doing what needed to be done that night. Joey had deserved every single blow I’d landed to his stupid, smug face. In my opinion, he’d deserved more. And the only reason I’d been able to stop myself was the promise I made to Gavin.

So to hear him tell me I’d broken that fired me up even more.

I slammed the front door shut and swiped my key card under the elevator pad, and marched inside the second the doors opened. Instead of heading to the lobby, I keyed in the basement.

As the elevator began its descent, I leaned back against the wall and pictured Gavin as I’d left him standing in our living room. That platinum-blond hair, those pale eyes and lips—he was like some sort of ethereal being, and here I was, all dark and fucking twisted, taking my shit out on him.

If there was a hell, I was going there.

Maybe that was why the elevator ride down forty-plus levels felt like I was coming home. When the car stopped on the basement floor, I stepped out into the storage rooms and cages.

I glanced around the dimly lit space, making sure no one else was around, which was kind of a joke. Most of the storage spaces down here were empty. The residents of the Towers were not the sort of people to venture down into a basement for anything, let alone a piece of furniture or sporting equipment.

Why would they when they had a state-of-the-art gym upstairs with a pool overlooking Park Avenue? Worked for me, since this was the best way to keep my *extracurricular* activities a secret.

I weaved down several aisles toward the back of the floor, and when I reached the door that had DANGER: DO NOT EXIT on it, I glanced over my shoulder to make sure no one was following.

When I was satisfied the coast was clear, I pushed through the door, and cold, damp air smacked me in the face as I stepped out of the illustrious Waldorf Towers and into a world where I actually belonged.

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# NINE

## *gavin*

I COULD ONLY stare as the door slammed shut, reeling in Daire's wake. I'd come home from my date feeling good and wanting to clear the air with him, only to somehow make things worse…again. My mind raced, replaying everything he'd said, but it was the image of him half-naked when I walked into his room that wouldn't go away. It wasn't that Daire had an incredible body—I already knew *that* much.

No, it was the multitude of bruises all over his back and torso that joined his many tattoos, including a particularly nasty one the size of a baseball on his ribs.

What the hell had he been doing to get those? And where was he going now?

Curiosity and worry got the best of me, and it took a split second for me to decide I was going after him. I thought he'd been going out for a booty call, but unless he was into getting the shit beaten out of him as foreplay, I didn't think that was the case anymore. And I couldn't see Daire willingly letting someone put their hands on him without retaliating.

My heart hammered as I threw open the door, just as the elevator Daire had stepped into closed. I swiped my card for the other elevator, cursing when it didn't open immediately.

"Come on," I said, shifting my weight from foot to foot and watching his lift descend. But it didn't stop on the main floor. It stopped in…the basement?

"What the hell?" My elevator chose that moment to finally arrive, and I hurried inside, not wanting to lose him. Though I couldn't imagine where

he could possibly go from the basement or why that would be his destination at all. I'd only been down there once by accident, and it was nothing to write home about.

If I hadn't seen those bruises, it would've crossed my mind that he'd found a hidden place to hook up in secret, but I didn't think that was what I'd be walking into. All I knew was he was hiding something, and I was going to find out what it was.

When the doors opened to the basement, I stepped out into the darkness to utter silence that was only interrupted by the sound of something clicking shut. I whipped my head to where the noise had come from—a door that was marked DANGER: DO NOT EXIT.

Now if that didn't scream Daire, I didn't know what did. Leave it to him to go places he shouldn't.

With only a barely lit path to guide me, I made my way to the non-exit, listening for any indication that Daire was still down here.

But the room was empty. I could feel it.

So where the hell was he going?

I hesitated at the door, my blood pumping and my mind racing. He would be so pissed to know that I was following him, but what did I have to lose? What if he was in some kind of trouble and his stubborn ass just wasn't saying anything about it because he refused to reach out for help?

I had to know. He was the one who thought he'd been doing me a favor with Joey, right? I hadn't taken it that way, only focusing on the fact that he'd gone against my wishes, but…he'd been protecting me in his own way. So I owed it to him to do the same.

Pushing the door open softly, I peeked out to see a small platform and set of stairs, leading down into some kind of…subterranean tunnel?

*What the hell?*

I tightened my fingers around the handle as warnings flashed inside my head, matching those on the door I was leaning against.

*Warning.*

*Do not exit.*

*Run.*

But the sound of footsteps echoing in the distance caught my attention, and I quickly shoved them aside. Daire was on the move, and I needed to get going if I didn't want to lose him.

Gathering all the courage I could muster, I slipped through the door and into God knows where. I headed down the concrete stairs to a crumbled platform, and zeroed in on the drop-off to what looked like—

Wait, was that a railroad track?

I scanned the dilapidated brick archway that curved overhead, the scattered debris on the platform at my feet covered in dirt, then pulled my phone out to shine the light around my immediate area. I was standing in some sort of abandoned railway tunnel.

At least, I hoped it was abandoned.

A sound to my left—where the cavernous tunnel disappeared into nothing but darkness—caught my attention, and I turned my light in that direction and saw the outline of Daire up ahead.

He was hugging one side of the tracks and walking with a sure stride that told me this wasn't the first time he'd done this. He'd been here before. He was familiar with this tunnel and wherever it went.

I glanced down to the right of the tunnel and was happy to note there was a bunch of wood and bricks lying piled up across the tracks, which would impede any oncoming train, should one come hurtling through there. A relief, to say the least, since the last way I wanted to be taken out was death by train.

Instead, all I had to worry about was death by unsavory characters or disease-infested rats. If Daire was merely skipping out on having to interact with humanity above ground, I was going to give him a piece of my damn mind.

I jumped off the platform and down on to the tracks, and even knowing I wasn't going to come face to face with a train car, my heart still hammered erratically in my chest. My phone lit the way for my feet as I hurried in the direction Daire had gone, keeping close to the wall like he had and doing my best not to flinch at every little sound I didn't recognize —which was all of them. It wasn't like I spent my days in underground Manhattan. Who knew if the scurrying sound to my right was people or rodents?

I shivered at the thought, my mind conjuring up all kinds of nightmare scenarios, from radioactive lizards to mutant turtles. Was Daire doing drugs? Was he buying them down here? Did he owe money to bookies? I had no idea what could have him venturing into the bowels of New York City, but if we both somehow survived this, I just might kill him.

There was a sound up ahead, and I swung my light that way just as Daire's form disappeared through some sort of opening. I picked up the pace, jogging in that direction. As I got closer, the muffled sound of people filled the once-silent tunnel, and I found myself standing at a small opening in the thick brick wall.

It wasn't a door, per se, or another tunnel. It looked more like a crack in the wall that someone had taken a sledgehammer to so people could climb through.

I came to an abrupt halt as I peered inside the hole in the wall, then looked down at my pressed grey pants and jacket and grimaced. My shoes were already a lost cause after stepping in God only knows, but was I really about to climb through what looked like a demolition site?

This was crazy. Clearly I'd lost my damn mind. But just as I was about to do the smart thing and turn around, a loud, raucous cheer reverberated from inside the opening, and I went through.

"And Jackhammer's down for the count!" a man shouted from on top of a jagged boulder several feet above the crowd, like he was the host of whatever was happening below. The horde was several people deep, though, and I couldn't tell what was going on without getting closer.

I definitely didn't belong here. The vibe was wild and feral, dirty and with an air of violence.

No, not just an air. This whole scene was *about* violence.

As casually as I could manage without sticking out like a sore thumb, I moved deeper into the crowd, searching for any sign of Daire, but it was the man knocked out cold on the concrete in the middle of a circle that caught my attention.

"Oh, come on, get up." A towering figure stood above the guy, who still wasn't moving. When he kicked at the man's hips, there was a groan.

He wasn't dead, whoever it was. But he wasn't in good shape.

"I said get up," the man standing growled, and that was when the host on the boulder jumped down and forced the big guy back.

"All right, that's enough. You win." He lifted the big guy's arm and turned him to face the crowd. "Another notch for Shane the Destroyer."

There were shouts mixed with more than a few boos as the Destroyer smirked at his victory.

"Who's next?" he shouted, his teeth smeared with blood. He spat by the feet of the man he'd defeated, and I shrank back as his gaze moved over the

crowd.

“How about me, fucker?”

My stomach dropped all the way down to my feet as Daire stepped into the circle. I’d seen the scowls and glares he’d given off for years, but never had I seen the menacing look on his face as he shrugged out of his jacket and tossed it aside. Then he lifted his shirt, and all those well-defined muscles came into view—along with the bruises that had sent me down here in the first place.

What the hell was he doing? Actively looking to get the shit beaten out of him? Was he crazy?

The host climbed back up on the rock and cupped his hands around his mouth.

“We have a challenger, and this one ought to be a bloodbath.” A sinister smile crossed the man’s lips, causing several in the mob below to whistle in approval. “You’ve all seen what the Destroyer can do, but can he survive… the Reaper?”

Daire sauntered around the circle, keeping his eyes on the man they called the Destroyer, as the one on the ground was pulled away by his arms. That was when the tattoo of the word “Reaper” scrawled across his upper back came into view, and it clicked.

Fuck. *That’s* what that meant?

The roar of the crowd echoed off the cavernous walls, all eyes on Daire…the Reaper? Was this for fucking real? Daire was going to fight that monster of a man who’d all but killed the other guy?

No. No way this was happening. I just had to get to him, knock some sense into him before he ended up six feet under.

But then I heard the voices of those around me, saw the money being exchanged. They were placing their bets on the winner, and it was Daire’s name on their lips.

“Bloodbath my ass. I bet Reaper has him on the ground in less than a minute.”

“Destroyer’s got a death wish. Reaper’s fuckin’ psychotic. I know where my money’s goin’.”

“That asshole should forfeit now.”

Wait a second. They thought *Daire* was going to win against the huge guy?

“Just a reminder of the rules,” the host shouted. “There aren’t any. Just no weapons, and don’t fucking kill each other. First one to knock out or get the other to concede wins.”

Daire was singularly focused, his dark eyes never leaving the man standing a head taller than his six-two frame. His tattoos and the angular cut of his jaw somehow made him look even more dangerous under the harsh overhead light, and for a moment, I believed he could take the Destroyer down.

And then the big guy swung, his long arm easily able to cross the distance between him and Daire. Fear clenched my stomach as I watched in horror, but the man’s fist never connected. In the time I blinked, Daire had dodged out of the way, landing a blow of his own to the Destroyer’s ribs, and then continued to pummel him, one strike after another.

A booming roar escaped the man as he pivoted back to face Daire, his anger rising at not getting in the first hit. But if Daire felt threatened, you couldn’t tell. His lips curved into a cruel smirk.

Destroyer lunged then, his meaty fist soaring through the air toward Daire’s face. But before it made contact with any part of him, Daire sidestepped the blow and kicked his leg out in a sweeping arc that connected with the back of Destroyer’s calves and knocked him clear off his feet.

The crowd went batshit crazy, and as the circle seemed to tighten on the two under the spotlight, a thunderous chant began to echo around the space. It wasn’t until it was repeated over and over again that I realized they were chanting, “Reaper! Reaper! Reaper!”

I pushed forward in the crowd, trying to get a better look of what was happening now that shoulders and heads were blocking my view, and when I finally found a clearing, my heart raced.

Daire was straddling his opponent, landing blow after blow to different parts of the guy’s body.

From somewhere behind me I heard, “The deathblows,” and I almost turned around to ask them what the hell they were talking about. But it was clear, so painfully and blood-red clear, that Daire’s nickname was because of this move. The swift kick to the legs, the gaining of the upper hand, and then, finally, these continuous blows…the deathblows.

It was shocking, an eye-opening scene to witness, as I stood there absolutely paralyzed. It wasn’t until someone bumped into my shoulder—

hard—that I realized Daire wasn't the only one people were now looking at.

"What do we have here?" the thug who'd just knocked me around jeered. "Looks like preppy boy got lost on the way home."

I swallowed as he looked over my suit, his shaved head and tattooed face making me take a step back until I ran into something solid behind me.

"Or maybe he wanted to slum it for the night. Place a few bets on some rabid dogs."

My pulse pounded as sweat popped out on my brow. The fight-or-flight response started to kick in as I realized the biggest danger was no longer in the center of the crowd under a spotlight, but was circling around me.

"Is that it, Preppy—got some money you want to throw around?" The guy behind me grabbed my arm and spun me around, his bloodied nose telling me that he'd been one of tonight's earlier participants. "Or maybe I'll just take this fancy watch of yours."

He held my arm up, shoving the sleeve of my jacket out of his way. Total fear had my words stuck in the back of my throat, and just as I was about to try to yank my arm free, I caught sight of something dark and ominous coming my way, right before I heard a bone-chilling snarl.

Then all hell broke loose.

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# TEN

## *daire*

WHATEVER CHAINS RESTRAINED the savage inside me from finishing off the Destroyer, bloodied and groaning beneath me, snapped when I saw a flash of platinum hair out of the corner of my eye.

I saw fucking red.

Between one heartbeat and the next, I was on my feet, fists swinging and bodies falling as I carved a brutal path between me and the last person who should be anywhere near this place. I ignored the shouts that begged me to stop, because all I could see was a look of pure terror in Gavin's eyes as the trash beside him touched him.

They fucking dared to *touch* him.

The noise that escaped me didn't sound human as I watched the prick lift Gavin's arm. I didn't think. I just reacted.

My hand shot forward, wrapping around the asshole's throat before he even knew I was there. He dropped his hold on Gavin, his first smart move of the night, but unfortunately for him, it would also be his last.

I squeezed his soft flesh, and his face went red and then tinged purple.

"Who the fuck do you think you are touching what's not yours?" I growled, lifting him up on his toes as he struggled to push my hands away.

"Daire," Gavin said. "Daire, stop."

But I was too far gone now, all the adrenaline from the fight combining with the rage I'd felt at seeing him surrounded.

"Please, let's just go." This time he tentatively put his hand on my arm and moved into my sightline. The pleading look in his eyes somehow

penetrated the red haze, and I hesitated before looking back at the shithead turning purple.

I jerked him away, sending him slamming to the ground. The group of men that had been surrounding Gavin stepped back, holding their hands up in submission. And even though every fiber of my being wanted to hurt them, to let them see how it felt to be the weak one, I needed Gavin to get the fuck away from here.

“Move,” I said to those still blocking our path, and then I grabbed Gavin’s jacket and hauled him through the crowd.

“Next time don’t bring your boyfriend so you can actually finish the fight,” someone said as we passed.

He didn’t see my quick jab to his throat coming, cutting off his air supply and leaving him wheezing and falling to his knees, but everyone else sure as fuck did—including Gavin, whose eyes were gonna pop out if they got any wider.

I pushed him forward toward the exit, and he stumbled over the rocks before catching himself and scurrying out of the fight space and into the tunnel.

Shit, how had he even found me here? He had to have followed me, but Jesus, what a stupid, dangerous thing to do.

Moving fast, I reached for my phone tucked into my back pocket and turned on the light, leaving Gavin to trail after. Now that he was out of immediate danger, I wanted to kick his ass, and I definitely didn’t want to talk. So when he called out my name, I gritted my teeth and said, “Keep moving.”

“But we’re going the wrong way.”

He thought I was taking him back through the tunnels? Where anyone could jump him at any time? Fuck that.

I lifted the light, shining it across a different exit that went up to the street, and then climbed the stairs. The door led to another small stairwell, and as I raced up the steps two at a time, Gavin stayed close behind.

He was breathing hard as he said, “Where are we going? Daire, wait.”

I punched through the door that led to the alley and stepped out into the rain.

The fat droplets of water felt cool against my overheated skin as I marched across the narrow street, but it did jack shit to wash away my

anger. So when the door snapped shut behind me, I whirled around and let loose.

"What the fuck do you think you were doing down there tonight?"

Gavin reared back, the rain soaking that shock of white hair to his forehead.

"*Me?* What were you—"

"Don't fucking test me right now, Gavin. I asked you a question."

"And I'd think it was pretty obvious." The fear from back at the fight left Gavin's eyes as he took a step toward me, and in its place was the irritation I was so good at pulling out of him. "I was following you."

"Then you're a fucking idiot," I spat, even though I knew he was anything but. Gavin was smart, kind, and too goddamn pure for a place like that, and the idea that he'd followed me down there—that he could've gotten *hurt*—made me want to drill some common sense into his head.

Even if I had to be mean about it.

"Excuse me?" Gavin's fists tightened at his sides as he glared up at me, and if any of the dickheads underground had seen this side of him, they might have thought twice about laying their hands on him. Seemed I brought out the worst in him—like that was news. "You did *not* just call me stupid."

"Except I did. Following me down there was stupid."

"Yeah? Well, going there in the first place isn't all that smart. Do you have a death wish or something?"

"What I *have* is none of your fucking business, and it'd do you good to get that through your thick skull." I tapped his temple, and he reached up to grip my wrist, shoving my hand away.

"You have a foul mouth," he said, his eyes shooting daggers at me as water ran down his neck and into the collar of his soaked shirt.

"And yours spouts sunshine and rainbows. This isn't news."

"Your sneaking off to beat the shit out of people every night is, though. Why?" He blinked, and I was momentarily distracted by his thick lashes that kissed his wet cheeks. They were so dark against his light skin, such a contrast to everything else that it made his eyes even more intense as they scanned my face.

He would never understand. None of the guys we hung around would. So I'd kept it a secret. I'd used it as a tool to get out all of my frustrations. A

tool to keep me from going too far off the rails. Because when no one cared about you, it was hard to give a shit about yourself.

“None of your fucking business.” I turned my back on him, grabbing my cigarettes from my pocket and quickly lighting one up, keeping it under the cover of the awning overhead. The high from earlier slowly dissipated as I stood there shirtless in the middle of the pouring rain, with my face aimed up toward the night sky. “Go home, Gavin.”

There was a slight pause, and then, “What?”

I glanced over at him, noting the way his impeccable suit was now plastered to his slim legs and lean torso. “I said, go home.”

“No.”

“Jesus, what is your deal? First you follow me here, then you almost get jumped, and now you won’t leave me alone?” I took a drag of my cigarette then blew it out. “You wanna fuck me? Is that it?”

Gavin’s jaw hit the pavement at that. His eyes roved over my naked torso and down to where my jeans barely clung to my hips. I knew he wasn’t interested in me that way, but since ordering him home wasn’t working, I had to find a new tactic—and this was it.

“Do I want to—”

“Fuck me? You seem to be following me around a lot lately. Pushing into my room when I’m naked—”

“Uh, you’re insane.” Gavin shook his head. “I think you’ve gotten one too many punches to the head during those fights of yours.”

“Or maybe I’m right. We live together, you’re single, maybe you’re a little hard up.”

Gavin scoffed. “Yeah, that’s why I followed you down into an abandoned railway tunnel, because I wanted you to fuck me in it. Did it ever occur to you that I might be worried about you? That I might care?”

No it hadn’t. “Who asked you to?”

Gavin’s jaw twitched as he glared across the alley at me, and I had a feeling that if I were closer, he might’ve landed a blow to my jaw.

“You’re such an asshole.”

“Again, this isn’t news.”

“Is it so horrifying to you that someone would worry about you?”

“Yes. So do me a fucking favor and stop.”

Gavin’s shoulders went rigid as he angled his chin up, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallowed back whatever retort was on his tongue.

“Fine,” he finally said.

“Fine.”

“If you want to hurt or punish yourself for whatever reason, who am I to stop you? Go and get the shit kicked out of you, see if I care.”

Gavin’s harsh words contradicted the worry etched into his features, as I flicked my cigarette butt to the ground and stomped on it like it was his feelings.

I didn’t do this. I didn’t do feelings, have friends, or people who cared about me. I hung with the rest of the group because that was where I’d been put. But this softness in Gavin’s eyes, this caring and worry I could see under the annoyance—I didn’t do that. I didn’t know how. I didn’t want to. Because when someone cared, you had a responsibility not to fuck it up, and I knew myself better than that.

Someway, somehow, I would always fuck it up.

I crossed the alley, and was about to step around him and head back down into the tunnels when Gavin reached out and put a hand on my arm.

“Try not to get yourself killed.”

For a second there my heart jolted at the soft request. But I masked my reaction with a derisive smirk. “’Cause you wanna fuck me?”

Gavin’s eyes narrowed and he shoved my arm away. “On second thought, do whatever the hell you like.”

“Always do.” I reached for the handle of the door and yanked it open. “The Towers are a few blocks to the right. Think you can find your way?”

“What do you care?”

“I don’t want your death on my conscience.”

“No fear of that,” Gavin said as he began to walk backward, then he turned away from me and continued up the alley. “I’m pretty sure you don’t have one.”

As I stood there watching him go, I cursed myself—and him—for the fact that I let go of the door and followed after him. It wasn’t until I saw him weaving his way through the handful of people out this late that I stopped, satisfied he’d made it out of the alley and onto the well-lit city street. Then I turned and headed back to the entrance underground.

I might not have *much* of a conscience, but what little I had seemed to be laser focused on Gavin Truitt.

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# ELEVEN

## *gavin*

I LAY IN bed wide awake as the minutes and then hours ticked by. As much as I hated myself for it, I couldn't sleep knowing Daire was still out there. What if he'd gone back to whatever fight club situation that was and gotten into some kind of trouble? It wasn't like he had anyone to back him up. Sure, he could hold his own—I'd seen that with my own eyes—but in a tag-team situation, would that still be true?

A small noise had me lifting my head, waiting for Daire to walk in the front door, but it proved to be a false alarm.

I couldn't stop the anxiety curling and spreading through my body as I glanced at the clock again. It was a little after five a.m. and he still wasn't back yet. He wasn't usually out this late, and now knowing what he'd willingly walked back into, what he did on these nights out, I doubted I'd ever sleep again on nights like this. *Mornings* like this.

The front door opened suddenly, and I shot up in the bed, my heart beating fast. Part of me wanted to go out there, make sure he was still in one piece and didn't need an ambulance, but the other part of me couldn't shake all the things he'd said to push me away.

He didn't want my help. He didn't need it. And when I heard his bedroom door close without him coming in to apologize or show me he was alive, the concern I'd been feeling the last few hours abruptly switched to anger.

Good, he was home safe. But fuck him for the fact that he gave no shits about himself or anyone else.

I had half a mind to go beat down his door and give him another piece of my mind, but God forbid he might twist it and think I want to fuck him.

Besides, nothing seemed to get through that thick skull of his, so anything I did would be futile. It would make me feel better to yell at him, though. Or would it? Because all I'd felt walking away from him after our fight was rage and exasperation, and that was exhausting. Worrying about someone you couldn't even get answers out of was bullshit. I didn't understand him at all, and that was the way Daire seemed to want it.

*So why, after all the shit he said to me, am I still awake thinking about it?*

With a frustrated sigh, I fell back on my pillow and forced myself to shut my eyes and try for a couple hours' sleep. What a wasted night. I barely remembered the date I'd gone on before this whole thing with Daire exploded so spectacularly, and it wasn't Trevor's face I saw behind my eyelids.

It was Daire's. That defiant confidence as he'd walked into the circle to challenge the Destroyer. I'd been so shocked at where following him underground had taken me that I was only now remembering the way he'd laid into the bigger guy without letting him land a blow. Obviously that wasn't always the case, if the bruises on his back and torso were anything to go by.

But no one had touched him tonight. He'd taken out several people in the crowd as well, in a way that was instinctual, doing it without having time to consider the consequences.

Now that the overwhelming terror I'd felt watching him had faded somewhat, I could acknowledge that he was an impressive fighter. I'd always assumed he honed his muscles in the gym, not beating people half to death, but it was clear he wasn't just good at it, not with a nickname like Reaper. He was great. The fact that Joey even still *had* a face told me Daire had held back and kept his promise of not killing the guy.

The thought had an ember of something warming my chest, but just as quickly as I felt it, it was snuffed out by the words he'd spat my way.

Goddamn, why did he have to be such a dick?

LESS THAN TWO hours of sleep made me a grumpy bastard the next morning. I'd fully expected to go through our usual non-speaking morning

routine while getting ready for school, but Daire was already gone when I ventured into the kitchen.

How did I know that he wasn't dead on his mattress? Because I'd knocked on his door and, when he didn't answer, checked his room to make sure he was alive. If I hadn't heard him come home earlier, I would've freaked out, but this was pure avoidance, and if he wanted to play that game, so be it.

I thought about telling the guys what had happened on our way to Astor, since Daire didn't make an appearance there either, but something held me back. I didn't know why, but it felt like the right thing to do, keeping Daire's secret even though he hadn't kept mine. He'd done it for my benefit, though, even if I didn't see it that way at the time, and what good would come from the other guys knowing? They'd only venture down into the tunnel and put themselves and Daire in danger.

So I kept quiet, too tired to contribute much to the conversation, and made sure to hit up the coffee bar the second I walked into Astor. I'd need more than what I'd finished off at my place if I was going to make it through the day with my eyes open.

I turned down the hall, on my way to my first class, and stopped short when I saw the three guys gathered up ahead. *Shit.* That was all I needed this morning—Joey and his band of dicks all hanging out by the lecture hall I needed to go in. Usually I got there early so I would miss this exact thing. They were less likely to bother me when surrounded by others—yes, they were still bothering me, all these months later.

Why couldn't Joey just let it go already? Oh, wait, he was an egotistical asshole who'd been handed his ass for everyone to see. So now he was making it his personal mission to make my life hell—whenever I was alone, that was.

My grip on the coffee cup tightened as I braced myself for the usual onslaught of insults about to be hurled my way. I probably should've told my brother what was going on, but that would only lead to even more retaliation from the guys. And since that was what had landed me in this position to start with, I figured the best course of action was to ignore Joey and his goons. They'd get bored eventually, right?

"Would you look at that," I heard Joey's right-hand man, Carl, say. "It's the loser prince minus his Park Avenue Pricks."

“Don’t you mean his *brother’s* Park Avenue Pricks?” Doug said, and then started to laugh, as I kept my head down, pretending to read my phone rather than look at them.

“Pretty pathetic he can’t find friends of his own,” he jeered as they broke apart and moved toward me.

My heart started to thump a little harder as I continued to ignore them, and for a split second I thought about sending a text to Donovan. I knew my brother—he’d drop everything to get to me before anything really bad could happen, and likely bring the cavalry. But I quickly nixed the idea, knowing that if I did that I’d appear even weaker than Joey already thought, and that was the last thing I wanted.

I could feel them circling me like sharks, but kept on moving. I just needed to get in the classroom around other people, then I’d be safe. These assholes only came for me when I was alone.

“Ignoring us today, Truitt?” One of them shoved the back of my arm, and I whipped my head around to glare at Doug.

God, how had I ever hung out with these guys? Granted, my association with them had been minimal and usually through Joey, their dickhead leader, so I’d never been on this side of their crowd. But Jesus, this constant badgering, this cornering of me when I was alone? They were bullies, something I never in a million years thought I’d have to deal with.

Something even my friends wouldn’t stoop to.

“Don’t touch me,” I said, knowing full well that I was no match for him alone, let alone with his friends surrounding me.

Doug snorted. “Or what? You’ll keep glaring at me?”

“Nah, he’ll just send someone else to do his dirty work for him.” That voice I’d recognize anywhere, and when my eyes landed on Joey’s face and now slightly crooked nose, some small part of me did a happy dance.

“I didn’t send Daire.”

“Sure you didn’t.”

“I didn’t.” I swallowed, refusing to let Joey intimidate me, even if all I wanted to do was run. “And don’t you think they would’ve found you by now if I wanted them to?”

Joey’s eyes narrowed a fraction, and when he took a step forward I immediately went back, only to run into Doug.

“You threatening me?” Joey said, and my mouth parted in complete and utter disbelief. How in the hell had I ever had any kind of feelings for this

guy?

Was I threatening him? I wasn't the one waiting in hallways to ambush and intimidate him whenever the opportunity arose. I wasn't the one still holding a grudge all these months later, even though he had been the one to put hands on *me*.

"I'm not threatening you. I'm just pointing out a fact."

Joey grabbed the front of my shirt, hauling me forward until we were practically nose to nose. "That better be all you're doing. Because I don't take kindly to threats."

"Let me go, Joey."

Joey batted his lashes and repeated in a high voice, "Let me go, Joey," and right then I had a vision of Daire stepping out of the classroom and seeing what was happening. I had a clear picture of the way he might haul Joey off me, toss him to the ground, straddle his burly body, and land blow after blow after—

"What are you smiling about?"

*You getting your face beat in.*

I didn't say that, though. Instead I shook my head. "Nothing."

Joey shoved me back so hard I bounced off Doug before stumbling to steady my feet, and as the three of them gathered in front of me, I thought about tossing my coffee all over them.

"Better get to class," Joey said, and stepped aside. "You wouldn't want to be late."

I straightened my shoulders, angling my chin high as I stepped past the three assholes. As I entered the classroom, the door shut behind me and I finally let out a sigh of relief.

I was safe, at least for now, and that would have to be enough.

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# TWELVE

## *daire*

“HEY, MR. I’M too Good to Sit with the Rest of Us.” Donovan stepped out in front of me on the way to my next class, blocking my path. “Where were you this morning?”

*For fuck’s sake.* An interrogation was the last thing I needed, not after the last few hours and no sleep.

“You keeping tabs on me too?” I rolled my eyes and pushed past him, only for East to move in front of me.

“Too?” he asked, arching a brow. “Who else has a death wish?”

“Move, you nosy shit.” I brushed by him, but Donovan and East flanked me like escorts.

“You’re an even lovelier shade of surly than usual today,” East mused. “Why is that? Gavin piss in your Cheerios?”

At the mention of Gavin’s name, I clenched my molars. He was the exact source of my mood this morning, and I’d gone out of my way to avoid him by leaving our apartment before he woke up. I didn’t trust what I’d do or say if I saw him, not after he’d put himself in danger and we had it out in the alley.

God, he drove me crazy. All those claims of concern and giving a damn when he was just snooping around and spying on me. I had no doubt I’d get another inquisition from him at some point, unless I’d finally managed to scare the shit out of him. My knuckles hurt like hell from the way I’d lost my mind trying to get to him last night, and since he wasn’t blind, that *should’ve* been enough to warn him away from me for good.

But this morning, I just hadn’t been willing to take my chances.

“Looks like you hit the nail on the head with that, man.” Donovan shook his head, and when his blond hair fell into his face, he ran his fingers through it, pushing it back. “Regretting letting my brother move in with you already? It hasn’t been that long.”

“Long enough,” I muttered, and the two of them exchanged a look.

“Okay, seriously, if things are getting worse between you two, he can always come back. It wasn’t my decision for him to leave—”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said, cutting Donovan off. I was an asshole, but I wasn’t going to force Gavin to leave unless it was on his terms. I’d gotten used to his noisy ass now. It’d probably be too quiet if he left.

“Um. Excuse me.” The timid voice to my left was one I’d usually ignore, until I saw who it belonged to.

Harry the Hacker, as we called the underclassman we used to get ourselves out of some tricky online situations, pushed his thick glasses up his nose and shifted his weight nervously. Usually we approached him, not the other way around.

“I don’t recall your being on our payroll today,” East said, giving Harry a look that told him in no uncertain terms to get lost.

The fact that he didn’t go scampering down the hall away from us told me there was something more important than his pride here.

“East, give it a rest,” Donovan said before turning toward Harry. “Everything good?”

“Actually…” Harry tightened his fingers around the straps of his backpack. “I saw something on my way to class.”

When he didn’t elaborate, Donovan gestured for him to go on.

“I-I wasn’t sure if you knew, but…there were a few guys harassing Gavin.”

My head shot up, and East and Donovan went still.

Donovan was the first to speak. “What do you mean, harassing?”

“Be specific,” East added. “And we want names.”

Harry nodded, looking a little less anxious now but still awkward as ever. “That guy he dated, Joey and a couple of his friends. I think their names are Carl and, um. I think Dan? I’m not sure—”

“Doug,” I said, my voice clipped. “Keep talking.”

Harry’s eyes widened, and he swallowed. “They were outside his class saying things like was Gavin ignoring them or threatening them. It just

seemed like they were trying to get a reaction out of him, and he kept ignoring them until one of them shoved him—"

"They what?" I said at the same time Donovan demanded, "Who?"

"Doug. But then Joey grabbed Gavin by the shirt, and they were surrounding him like they were going to hurt him…"

The buzzing in my ears grew louder, blocking out the rest of what Harry said as pure fury filled my veins.

They'd *touched* him? Fucking *bullied* him? After I'd done Gavin a favor by not sending Joey to an early grave, that piece of shit was still messing with him?

Shit. Or were they messing with him now *because* of what I'd done?

"Where are they?" My tone was barely human, but somehow I managed to get those three words out. My desire to go pulverize Joey and the fuckwads he hung out with was building in me like a raging inferno.

"Daire, I think that—"

"What?" I rounded on Donovan. "We should stand here holding our dicks? Your brother is—"

"Exactly that." Donovan glared up at me. "*My* brother. You think I'm happy about this?"

"I think you're so fucking wrapped up in *your* little love story, you don't know shit about what's happening with Gavin."

Donovan's eyes narrowed. "Oh, and I suppose you do?"

"I know more than you."

"If that's the case, then you're doing a shit job of looking out for him."

My hands balled into fists at my sides, and even the shooting pain in my knuckles wasn't enough to make me unclench them.

"All right, you two." East moved between me and Donovan, his hands up as though that could stop me if I wanted to land a quick jab to Donovan's pretty face.

*I* was doing a shit job looking out for Gavin? Fuck that. I'd saved his ass twice in the past few months. Donovan could take his bullshit accusation and shove it up his ass.

"*This*, you two fighting each other, is not going to help anyone. Especially not Gavin."

I never thought East would be the voice of reason, but when tempers were fired up and blood was boiling, the ability to think and rationalize had

a tendency to up and vanish. Something mine and Donovan's brains seemed to have done in this moment.

"What we *need* to be doing," East said as he turned back to face Harry, "is gathering as much information as possible on these three miscreants."

"Fuck that," I said. "I'm not about to stand around and do research while these assholes mess with Gavin."

"He's fine right now." Harry's voice shook.

"What do you mean?" Donovan said. "How do you know that?"

"He has class. I mean, I saw him go into the lecture hall, and they left."

"So they waited for him." I shook my head and began to pace, twisting one of my fists in the palm of my other hand. "They fucking ambushed him."

Harry nodded. "That'd be my guess."

"Motherfuckers," I spat, my mind spinning as I tried to remember whether Gavin had ever said anything about being hassled. If he'd acted upset or sad, scared about going to school. But I was coming up blank. There was nothing, no indication that any of this had been happening, and I knew why—because of me.

He'd trusted me once with his secret, and I'd "betrayed" him. At least, that was how he'd seen it. So why would he come to me with this now?

"I need to go find him." I was about to storm off when a firm hand grabbed my arm and I whirled around to see East arching one of his haughty eyebrows. "What?"

"Why don't we approach this a little differently this time?" When I glared down at his hand, he was smart enough to remove it and slip it into his pocket. "Fists are a good first approach, I agree. I rather enjoyed seeing Joey's face in shimmering shades of purple. But it's clear that even a swift punch to his face wasn't enough to deter him."

"So what's left—murder?" I was only half joking, but if that was where he was going, I was happy to get on board. I was pretty sure East would have the connections to not only help us bury a body, but to get away with it.

"Oh no." East's grin turned cunning. "That'd be too quick, too final. We want Joey to suffer. We want him and his friends to rue the day they messed with one of the Park Avenue Princes."

I looked at Donovan, waiting for him to nix the idea, but the vengeance swirling in his eyes matched every feeling I was having. He was just as

pissed, just as fired up as I was over this.

“Gavin can’t know.” The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them, and Donovan nodded.

“I agree. If he thinks we’re going after Joey, or that we found out what’s been happening, he’ll be humiliated. Wait.” Donovan looked at me. “Is this why he’s been so surly the last few months?”

“I’m sure it hasn’t helped.”

“What happened with him and Joey?” Donovan searched my face as though it held the answer to his question, but he was shit out of luck. It wasn’t my story to tell. “Why did you go after him?”

“Does it matter?” I countered. “He’s a piece of shit. I should’ve ended him when I had the chance.”

“Yes, well, there’s more than one way to end someone.” East looked back to Harry and crooked his finger. “Looks like you’re going to be on the payroll today after all. We have a plan to put together.”

Then he grinned at me and Donovan. “A revenge plan, that is.”

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# THIRTEEN

## *daire*

### Phase One

PATIENCE WAS NOT something I possessed, and waiting a couple of days until Gavin had a second date with that actor only spiked my temper with the need for revenge. I couldn't believe I'd been able to wait this long without going after that shithead Joey and smashing more than just his face this time, but East and Donovan knew me too well and hadn't left me alone while they got a plan—and the rest of the guys—together.

"Ugh, I can't believe they're letting this trash in here," West muttered as we watched Joey, Doug and Carl, take up residence at a VIP table at one of our favorite nightclubs, Kyanite, on Wednesday night. The smug looks on their faces as they looked down on those outside their roped-off area wouldn't be there for long.

Still, my body was wound tight, vibrating with rage.

"They're only here as a favor to us, and it'll be the last time they set foot in this place," East said.

Preston frowned from where he sat lounged on a velvet couch in our own roped-off section. "They don't think it's suspicious they got plucked out of line and handed a VIP spot?"

"Social climbers like that?" Travis snorted. "They beg for special attention every time they come here, so trust me, they jumped at the chance to make everyone else feel like a peasant."

"I am so ready for this." West rubbed his hands in anticipation. "When do the models get here?"

Donovan checked his phone, and a sly smile spread over his lips. “Speak of the devil. They just arrived.”

Phase one consisted of enlisting a few of Donovan’s fellow models to get the attention of the fuckwads and get invited into their VIP. From there, the plan was *on*.

“God, these guys are such idiots.” Travis shook his head as a couple of ridiculously attractive guys made their way into the club, making sure to pass by Joey’s table and wink. True to sleazebag form, Joey shot to his feet, immediately inviting Donovan’s friends to join them for drinks—and probably to drool all over them.

Donovan must’ve been paying them a shit-ton.

“The fact that they’re idiots is why this plan works,” East said.

I watched the scene unfolding before me from the shadows where I sat. Not that they had any idea. Joey and his friends were still walking around Astor as if they were smarter than us, as if they didn’t have a guillotine hanging over their heads.

Little did they know, that blade was about to drop.

“We gonna do this or sit here and sing ‘Kumbaya’ all night?” I said.

“Patience, Grasshopper.” East moved in beside me, handing me a shot. “This is all part of the plan. Lulling them into a false sense of security.”

“This is making *me* want to vomit.”

“Drink your shot and behave. You’ll get your turn soon enough.”

I threw back the Liquid Cocaine shot and slammed the glass down on the table. Usually I’d tell East to fuck off with his orders, but tonight I was willing to follow along, since what was about to happen would make all this waiting worth it.

“Do you think they’re even a little bit suspicious?” Preston said, shifting his eyes between the losers at the bar and Donovan. “Your friends are *way* out of their league.”

“They’re also great actors.” Donovan winked.

“Anyone else still find it weird when Preston openly checks out a guy?” Travis held his hands out and did a turn. “Especially when I’m right here.”

Preston threw the straw in his drink at Travis’s head, making him laugh, and the sound grated on my last nerve. “Can you shut the fuck up? We’re not here to have a good time.”

Travis rolled his eyes. “Clearly.”

“There’s my cue,” East said as one of Donovan’s friends smoothed a hand over Joey’s shoulder and twirled a finger through the back of his hair.

You couldn’t have paid me enough to touch that piece of shit.

Scratch that—I’d touch him for free, but not in any way he’d enjoy.

East’s lip curled into a devious grin, and as he set off through the crowd of clubgoers, I got to my feet and moved to the edge of our VIP area.

My eyes narrowed on the haughty set of East’s shoulders as he crossed the main floor, and when he came to the far end of the bar and crooked a finger at the bartender, I could feel the vein in my temple begin to throb.

This was the most important part of the whole plan. If this didn’t go our way, we were fucked. But if anyone could pull it off, it was East.

My fingers balled into a fist at my side as I watched the two chat back and forth. The bartender nodded at whatever East was saying, then an exchange of cash was made and the plan was put into place.

The bartender moved away then, going back to making drinks for the crowd gathered at the bar, as East weaved his way back through the crowds. None of us asked for confirmation of the task he’d set out to do. The smug look on his face was answer enough. So when the DJ started playing a pulse-pounding favorite, the guys started to dance in celebration while I kept my eyes trained on the target.

Joey with an arm wrapped around one of the models, while another whispered some bullshit lie to Doug the dick. It wasn’t until the bartender arrived in front of Carl with a tray of drinks—three shots for the big men on campus, and three vodka sodas for the ever-conscious-of-their-weight models—that I felt a feral smile curl my lip.

It was the perfect plan, really.

So simple.

The three assholes threw back their shots.

Now it was only a matter of time.

And suddenly, I had all the patience in the world.

## Phase Two

THE BUZZ OF the tattoo gun hummed, and with every dot of ink into Joey’s skin, a curl of satisfaction settled in the pit of my stomach. Not enough to soothe the beast that wanted to come out. But watching a

professional tattoo artist freestyle a design of our choice on his neck was fucking priceless.

“Dude, what’s with the scowl?” Travis asked. “I figured this would be the part you’d be all shits and giggles over. You know, decorating this fucker’s face?”

“Maybe if it was with my fist.”

Travis crossed his arms, scrunching his nose up as he peered down at the limp dick between us.

“You already did that. Plus, the goal here is to make them suffer, not us. If you go to jail, he wins.”

“If I kill him, he dies.”

“I don’t know if you’re joking or—”

“He touched Gavin. He deserves anything he gets.”

“Truuue, which is why he’s getting a reminder of what he is tattooed on his neck.” Travis’s grin was downright devious as he peered over the shoulder of Simone, who was wielding the guillotine tonight. “It’s uncanny how real that looks.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve seen a few of them in my time,” she replied. “But I do appreciate your offer to have a lifelike piece to study.”

“You offered?” West looked Travis over and shook his head. “What am I saying, of course you did.”

“Yeah, but then I thought of the oozing genital warts she was gonna add to the image and thought better of it.” Travis reached down and rubbed between his thighs. “Ain’t no one messing with this work of art.”

“For fuck’s sake.” I glared at Travis’s hand. “Do you have to make everything about your dick?”

“No. But we’re literally tattooing *dicks* on Joey and his idiot friends’ faces. I figured that would at least get a ha-de-ha-ha out of you. Jesus, Daire, lighten up.”

I wished it were that easy. But the longer we stood here, the more annoyed I got, and the only thing that would make me feel better would be when Joey finally woke up and saw what he got for messing with us—messing with Gavin.

I shot Travis the finger and turned to see East over by the window of the shop, a phone to his ear as he nodded and pointed at Preston, who was busy scribbling something down on a piece of paper. Donovan stood at the front door keeping guard. The way we’d all come together to pull this plan off

*did* make me feel a little fucking ha-de-ha—like I was part of something bigger than just myself.

East ended his call and looked over at the three bodies laid out on tables between us, two of which were waiting for their turn under the gun. To some that might've seemed slightly terrifying, to me it felt…cathartic. It's not like they were dead, just passed the fuck out.

"Right." Simone let out a sigh. "That's one down. Which one's next?"

"Doesn't matter," I said, walking over to East. "They're all getting one."

She grinned. "Damn, I should've done this to my cheating ex. You guys are vicious."

"They deserve it."

Joey groaned and struggled to open his eyes, and Travis checked the zip tie at his wrists. "It's not time to wake up, asshole. Night-night."

As Joey's eyes fell shut, West and Donovan moved over to the other two to keep watch, as Simone applied fresh dicks—the same as Joey's—to their necks. We needed to make sure they stayed passed out if we were to have a hope in hell of moving them to the next phase.

Because this wasn't enough. Not by a long shot.

"What's the ETA on Harry?" I said as East casually lounged back in an armchair.

"He's almost here. Scotty's about five minutes away."

"You think he can manage to pull this off?"

"I think that Harry is a bigger criminal than all of us."

"That a yes?"

"It wasn't a no."

I paced back and forth, my nerves strung tight, and on my third or fourth pass, East kicked at my ankle, earning him a death stare.

"I'm getting motion sickness watching you. Chill the fuck out, or go get something to drink."

"I don't need a drink. I need to finish this."

"And we will. But you need to calm down. We planned this, and if you go rogue, it will ruin everything."

Preston eyed me from his spot by the door. "We've got this. For Gavin."

I nodded, finally feeling some sort of purpose in my life, and that purpose was to teach Joey and his bullying friends a lesson…

For Gavin.

# Phase Three

ALONG WITH DONOVAN, I helped load Carl into the Sprinter after he'd gotten his own special neck treatment, though I was tempted to throw him in the gutter.

Like he knew what I was thinking, East waited until we'd shoved Carl into a seat before turning back to Simone and handing her a thick stack of cash.

"If anyone asks, we were never here," he said.

She nodded and shoved the money into her bra. "Never seen you before in my life. But come back anytime."

Travis stuck his head out of the Sprinter. "Feel free to tattoo my dick on anyone you'd like. Minus the STDs."

West rolled his eyes, grabbing Travis by the back of his shirt and hauling his ass back into the van so we could head to our next destination. I didn't know how much longer these fuckers would be out, but they were starting to stir and moan every few minutes. I could make sure they were knocked out for a lot longer, but East wanted them conscious for the final part of the plan.

"Do they need seatbelts?" Preston said, hovering over Joey like he had every intention of fastening him into the seat, but West shot him a look.

"They're zip-tied. I don't think they're going anywhere."

"We might stop suddenly and they could fall over."

"Then they fall the fuck over," I growled, moving to the back of the Sprinter as far as I could from the three I'd have a hard time not strangling if I got too close.

East was the last one in, and as he took the seat by Harry, who was already working on phase three, he called out to Scotty, "We're in. Let's go."

As we took off, leaving the quiet, shadowed street behind, it was time to focus on taking the next thing from these assholes. Fucking with their looks had been one thing, but fucking with their money was going to really make them lose their minds.

"I've got all three accounts pulled up and ready for transfer," Harry said, his laptop screen illuminating the concentration on his face. "Just to confirm, you want to pull from both checking and savings accounts, right?"

“And any other account they have on there,” West said. “Take it all from these bitches.”

Harry nodded, tapping his keyboard as East watched over his shoulder.

“Is there not a charity for bastards who touch things that don’t belong to them and should die of chlamydia and rot in hell?” Travis asked, kicking his booted feet onto an empty seat. When we all turned in his direction, he shrugged. “What? It could exist.”

Preston cocked his head like he was thinking it over. “We could always make one.”

“No. We’re not doing anything that can be tracked back to us,” East said. “Anonymous donations to Bully No More in the amount of”—he scanned the screen and smirked—“five million from Doug the dick, you cheap-ass. And a little over twelve from Carl the cuntbag. As for Joey the jackass… Can I get a drumroll, please?”

West used Carl’s face as the drum and smacked out a beat on his forehead as we waited for how much we’d be squeezing out of the ringleader for all this shit.

A Cheshire Cat smile curved East’s lips. “And proof money can’t buy you class, Joey will be donating all twenty-one million of his inheritance to the men’s domestic violence shelter of New York.”

Travis let out an ear-piercing whistle as the rest of the guys cheered and slapped the seats in front of them.

It was a good thing Gavin wasn’t here, because even after the shit he’d been put through, I had no doubt he’d tell us we were taking things too far. He’d be wrong, though. These three didn’t deserve anything less than what they were getting, and only once we’d destroyed their reputation would I feel a little less murderous…maybe.

## Phase Four

“JESUS, THESE FUCKERS are heavier than they look.”

I eyed Travis from where I was crouched inside the van with my arms hooked under Joey’s pits, more than ready to get this fuckface to his final destination.

“Quit your bitchin’. I’ve got the heavy end.”

“How about you *both* shut your traps and get out so the rest of us can follow?” East suggested as he held the door to the van wide, a superior brow arched high against his hairline.

West snorted from the back of the Sprinter, where he and Donovan were rearranging Carl’s body to make it easier for transport. “Says the one who is doing zero manual labor.”

East shoved his head inside and eyed his best friend. “I’m holding the door open.”

“Which leaves Preston to do what?”

“He’s going to jam the security cameras then come back and sit here with Doug the douche to make sure he doesn’t escape.”

Preston frowned. “He’s out cold. Wouldn’t it just be easier if you and me took—”

“The time to do exactly what I have planned?” East interrupted. “Why, yes, it would be. You do your part, and I am going to keep a look out as we haul these thugs—”

“Excuse me?” Travis said, shifting Joey’s dead weight from one hand to the other. “*Who* hauls these thugs?”

“Well, all of you, and then while I’m making sure the appropriate images and videos are procured for the final phase of my plan, one of you can go and help Preston with Doug.” When we all just stood there, glaring at East’s obnoxious ass, he added, “My plan, my rules.”

I didn’t care either way. Hell, I’d be happy to drag two of them by the ankles across Astor’s courtyard. But one of East’s main rules when he concocted this plan had been that no physical harm was to come to these dickwads.

Something I was pretty sure he’d implemented for my benefit only.

There was a curse behind me as I exited the van with Joey, and I glanced over my shoulder to see Donovan glaring down at Carl’s incapacitated body. Okay, maybe that rule had been for him too.

Donovan was usually one of the most even-tempered people around, so it was unusual to see him so volatile. The curses, the tension radiating off him, the look in his eyes—all told me he wouldn’t mind dropping Carl to the pavement.

I totally understood the feeling—I wanted to do the same with Joey, had wanted to ever since I found out what the fucker had done to Gavin. But the guilt of not knowing that something had been wrong with Gavin was clearly

eating at his brother tonight. It was probably the main reason Donovan hadn't invited his muscle-bound boyfriend, Kelly, along to help. The last thing he wanted was to lose his shit in front of someone who thought the sun shone out of his ass, and Donovan looked pretty much how I felt.

Murderous.

"Over here," East said, directing us through the courtyard toward Astor's main building. "Put them up here."

We lugged them up the couple of stairs to the landing where the main doors led into Astor, then put them down on the ground with their backs propped up against the wood. As we stood back to marvel at our handiwork, East pointed at Travis.

"You, go help Preston."

"You can suck my dick."

East ran his eyes up and down Travis's body then pursed his lips. "I don't know where it last was, so…pass."

Travis shot him the finger but then turned to jog back to the van as East glanced at the rest of us.

"Well, what are you waiting for? The plan is for *their* reputation to be ruined, not ours. You know what's next."

I knew exactly what was next, but I wasn't about to touch Joey in any way other than to rearrange his face. "No."

"No? But this is the best part."

I crossed my arms. "I said no. And if you want Joey, and yourself, to still be breathing tomorrow, you're not going to push the issue."

East let out a long-suffering sigh then looked to his partner in crime, West. "You ready to do this?"

West was always up for a laugh, or pulling off a prank, and with a devious smirk he bent down and started yanking off Carl's shoes—then his socks, jeans, and everything in between until he was stark naked.

West straightened to his full height and dusted off his hands. "One down and—"

"Aw, man, you started without me," Travis complained as he and Preston moved up the stairs and deposited Doug on the other side of Joey.

"—two to go." West looked at the only other one of us six who'd even contemplate removing Joey's clothes.

God, what had Gavin ever seen in this guy? He was boring as fuck, controlling, abusive—and, as Travis removed Joey's final piece of clothing,

I was happy to note his dick was smaller than a fucking French fry.

"Damn." Travis cocked his head to the side. "No wonder Gavin was always grumpy."

No shit. That thing between Joey's legs wouldn't have penetrated or rubbed up against anything in a way that felt good. Not in a way that I would—

Whoa, where the fuck had *that* thought come from?

"Daire?" Donovan was looking at me like he was waiting for something, but when it was clear I had no clue what he wanted, he said, "You happy with that?"

I looked down at the three naked assholes propped up against the door, their legs spread so their ankles were linked in a familiar way, their hands bound and resting over their limp dicks—then I bent down, wadded up a pair of socks, and stuffed them in Joey's mouth.

Donovan chuckled and did the same to the other two, and then I nodded.

"Yeah, I'm pretty fucking ecstatic. You?"

He nodded as we moved out of the way so East could take his photos and videos for the final nail in Joey's coffin. Once he was done, he looked back at the rest of us with an evil gleam in his eye.

"Well, I believe our work here is done." As he stepped back to join the group, I heard a moan and looked over to see Joey's head lolling on the door and his eyes starting to open.

"Wait." I walked over to the motherfucker who had put his hands on Gavin again *after* I'd had the good grace to leave him alive the first time around. Then I crouched down and slapped the side of his face a couple of times until I had what little attention he could muster.

Satisfaction wasn't something I was used to feeling, unless it came in the form of knocking out my opponent. But as I looked down at Joey's pathetic form and saw the fear in his eyes—the same kind he no doubt delighted in when terrorizing Gavin—a sinister smile curled my lip.

"You're waking up alive this time," I said, then growled out a solemn promise. "But if you touch him again, I'll fucking kill you."

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# FOURTEEN

## *gavin*

"THE CAVIAR BRIOCHE donut and Toro sashimi and crispy rice." The waiter at Zero Bond set two elegant appetizer plates in the center of the table and gestured toward my almost-empty cocktail. "Another gin and dubonnet for you, sir?"

I nodded. "Yes, thank you."

"I'll try one of those too," Trevor said, winking at me as he moved his glass aside. "Gavin tells me they were Queen Elizabeth's favorite."

"Is that right?" The waiter raised a brow at me in question.

"It's true," I said. "They say she had one every day, and considering she lived well into her nineties, I figure it's a safe choice."

He gave me a polite smile that told me he couldn't care less. "Very good, sir. I'll have those right out."

As he walked off, I chuckled and laid my napkin across my lap. "I don't think he appreciated my knowledge of useless information the way you do."

"Then it's a good thing you're on a date with me right now and not him." Trevor's smile was blinding, and it was easy to see why he was such a rising star in Hollywood. What wasn't as obvious was what he was doing on another date with me. My personal life was a mess, and I had a knack for choosing the wrong men, like every one of my exes. If Trevor knew what he was really getting into, he wouldn't be looking at me like that.

God, that was some serious pity-party thinking right there. That wasn't me, at least not usually. Here I was, though, on this amazing date with a great guy, and in the back of my mind I was stressing—worried about what I faced almost daily at Astor and wondering when that would stop. Worried

about Daire running off to bust a few faces, and maybe even his own. It was ridiculous to even care, since he'd flat-out told me not to.

That was easier said than done, though. My one bit of relief came from the fact that at least he didn't know Joey and his crew were still messing around with me, or I'd have an even bigger issue on my hands.

*For fuck's sake, stop thinking about it. Be here, with this amazing guy who's actually interested.*

I shoved all thoughts of Daire and the others out of my mind and turned my attention back to Trevor. With the candles flickering between us, his eyes glittered a darker green than they did in the light, still gorgeous no matter what shade they were, and I smiled despite myself.

"You're right," I said. "You're a much better date than I imagine he'd be."

Trevor chuckled and reached for my small plate, loading it up with our appetizers before handing it back to me. I hadn't planned on trying the caviar brioche thing, but now that it was on my plate, it'd be rude not to.

I waited to see if he'd pick it up with his fingers or cut into it, and when he picked up his fork and knife, I did the same.

To my surprise, it wasn't bad at all, just not something I'd usually go for. But hey, maybe that was a metaphor for what I needed in my life. To go for things I usually wouldn't. Like Trevor. His manners were impeccable, and sometimes I'd hear a hint of a Southern accent that was pretty adorable. Since I'd never dated an actor before, I'd done something out of character and scoured the gossip sites to make sure there weren't any red-flag stories about him out there. I couldn't afford another asshole in disguise, but so far it seemed like I'd actually found someone relatively normal. At least normal in my world. He was used to red carpets and so was I. Neither of us needed the other financially. And if the worst thing he did was get me to eat something I wasn't crazy to try, then I would be a very happy guy.

"What do you think?" Trevor asked.

"About what? Oh, the food, right. It's…interesting."

He laughed and brought his napkin up to his lips. "Is that your way of saying you hate it?"

"Hate's a strong word."

"Loathe? Detest entirely?"

I shook my head and decided to take another bite. "Would I do that if I thought it was terrible?"

Trevor smirked as I suppressed a shudder from piling way too much caviar on my fork. “You might if you want to prove a point or please the person you’re with.”

“Oh yeah? You think I want to please you?” I asked.

“I know you do.”

The way his voice deepened made my dick take notice, and I wasn’t sure if I was annoyed or relieved when the waiter interrupted with our drinks.

I quickly finished off the rest of my first before he took it away, and I tapped my new glass against Trevor’s. He took a long swallow, but it was clear whatever he’d been expecting, this was not it.

I bit back a smile at the way he tried to school his face and not look disgusted.

“You like it, huh?” I teased.

He brought his napkin up to his lips and nodded, but he didn’t look me in the eye. “This is…interesting.”

That had me laughing, and I reached for his glass, setting it beside mine before motioning for the waiter to come back so he could order something more his speed.

No complaints here. More for me.

My phone buzzed in my pants pocket, but I wasn’t about to check it on a date. My focus was one hundred percent on Trevor. Whoever it was would have to wait. That was easier said than done, though, when it went off again, and again, and then a fourth damn time.

I shifted on the seat, feeling like I had a damn vibrator in my pants. Trevor gestured to my pocket.

“You can check it if you like. I promise not to be offended.”

I sighed, shaking my head, vowing to silence the damn thing as soon as I made sure no one was dying.

“I’m sorry.” I lifted my hips to pull the cell out, and Trevor’s eyes dropped to the move.

“Can’t say I am.”

The throb in my dick returned, and I now wasn’t half as annoyed at whoever was blowing up my phone. That was until I glanced down and saw several missed notifications from the last person I ever expected to hear from—East.

What did he want? I could count on one hand the number of times James Easton had ever deigned to contact me.

*Did something happen to Donovan?*

*Did something happen at the Towers?*

*Oh my God, are the Towers on fire?*

No, that was just ridiculous. A) We would've heard something like that on *both* our phones because that would've been major news, and B) My brother would've called—unless, of course, he was *in* the fire.

*Wow, way to be dramatic, Gavin. Maybe just look and find out.*

I opened up the thread.

EAST:

Good evening, young Truitt. Attached you will find a tasty little morsel for you to enjoy at your convenience. Remember, revenge is a dish best shared… among friends.

Then there was a video attachment.

EAST:

You're welcome.

*What the?*

I was about to hit the video attachment when my eye caught again on the word *revenge*, and I suddenly froze.

Revenge for what? Revenge against whom? The only thing I could think of was—

*No.* There was no way East meant what I thought he meant.

My stomach twisted as I sat there trying to decipher East's cryptic little note. It wasn't until Trevor put a hand on my leg that I startled and remembered where, and whom, I was with.

"Gavin? Is everything all right?"

"Oh, uh, yeah. I mean, I think it is. I'm sorry. Could you give me a second? I need to go and make a quick call."

I didn't, of course. There was no way I'd ever call East in the middle of a date. But I had to find out what the hell was on that video.

"Go—seriously, I'm fine. Do what you have to."

I shot to my feet and dashed off in search of somewhere private. Once I'd found a somewhat secluded alcove, I looked at my phone again.

With one eye shut, I gathered all my courage and opened the video.

There was East's smug face, his eyes glittering devilishly, and he panned away from himself and turned to show—

*Is that Astor's courtyard?*

My confusion tripled as he continued his wide sweep until his camera landed on Donovan, West, Travis, and Preston standing side by side looking at something with great intent. Then he turned and zeroed in on what had their attention, and my jaw hit the floor.

There, propped up against the doors to one of the most prestigious universities in the country, were Joey, Carl, and Doug. All three of them completely naked, legs spread, and socks stuffed inside their mouths.

But that wasn't what was most alarming. That would be the looming, dark presence that was Daire, who was crouched over Joey's powerless form, his face inches above the one that had teased, tormented, and abused me for months, as he promised in a voice that sent chills down my spine: "You're waking up alive this time. But if you touch him again, I'll fucking kill you."

*Oh my God. Oh my* God.

Daire didn't have to say my name for me to know that I was the *him* he was talking about. He got to his feet, then East turned the camera back to himself and winked before ending the video.

I stared at my phone in complete and utter disbelief, shock rushing through every fiber of my being. They knew. Somehow, my friends knew what Joey and his crew had been doing to me. It was clear as the naked image of those three had been, and what they had done to them…

*Oh my God.* I needed to get out of here. I needed to leave. I needed to figure out what the hell Daire had been thinking, and how he and the rest of the guys had even found out in the first place.

Heart racing, I stumbled back to the table, not bothering to sit.

One look at my face and Trevor's eyes widened in alarm. "Everything okay?"

"Actually, no. I'm sorry, something's come up, and I have to go."

"Oh. Okay. I can take you—" He moved to stand up, and in my panic I practically shouted "No" at him.

“Sorry, I just mean that’s not a good idea,” I said, even though my heart was pounding so hard I wondered if maybe I would need him in case I had a heart attack. Or to hold me back from launching myself at Daire when I found him.

I wiped my suddenly sweaty brow and forced a tight smile at Trevor. “But will you call me tomorrow?”

“Yeah, of course—”

His words cut off as he watched me down the rest of my drink in a couple long swallows before slamming it a little too hard on the table.

“Thanks for dinner,” I said, and then took off before he could say another word.

Didn’t it just figure? The moment things in my life were starting to look up was when it all came crashing down.

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# FIFTEEN

## *daire*

I WAS FEELING pretty fucking good.

That didn't happen often. But as I lounged back in my chaise that overlooked the city from my living room, I threw back a shot of the good stuff, a bottle of Louis XIII, and almost smiled.

Almost.

The image of Joey, Carl, and Doug propped up outside Astor literally freezing their dicks off as they slowly started to wake up and realize what was happening was one I'd never forget. If it'd been my plan, things would've gone much worse, but I couldn't deny that the pure terror on Joey's face when I threatened him sent a wave of satisfaction through me. He'd never even look in Gavin's direction again.

Would I catch hell from Gavin when he arrived at Astor tomorrow and put two and two together? Probably. Had it been worth every curse he'd throw my way? Abso-fucking-lutely.

Wanting to keep the warmth flowing through my body, I poured myself another shot, relaxing as an alt-rock song from the early nineties blasted through the apartment. The rest of the guys had gone out to Church, an exclusive club we belonged to, to celebrate and give themselves an alibi, but I didn't give a shit about showing my face. Those three assholes had gotten what was coming to them, and there was no way in hell they'd give us up. Not with the amount of shit we had on them, including video footage from Astor's security cameras—which Harry had hacked into—that clearly showed Gavin being pushed around on several occasions.

So they could go ahead and out themselves as abusers and bullies, or they could keep their mouths shut and deal with the consequences of what they'd done.

I threw back the shot before I could think too much about that and get riled up again. The liquor was doing its job of numbing everything, and I wanted to keep it that way.

Something that sounded like a door slamming pierced through the music, and out of the corner of my eye, someone moved.

"Where the fuck are you?" Gavin shouted, his entire body coiled like a rattlesnake as he sprinted toward my room, not even noticing me sitting by the window. He burst into my bedroom without knocking and flipped on the light. When he didn't find what he was looking for, he stormed out, his hands balled tightly into fists.

Looked like someone got the good news early.

I got to my feet, smirking as I cocked my head to the side. "Looking for me?"

Gavin screeched to a halt. The flush on his cheeks deepened, and it must've been the cognac that made me notice how good he looked pissed off. Even if it was at me.

"You asshole," he seethed, crossing the space between us. He looked like he wanted to hit me, but the chaise in between us stopped him short. Not that it did anything for his anger.

"Have you lost your mind? What the hell did you think you were doing?" He had to yell to be heard over the music, which seemed to piss him off even more. "And turn that shit down."

I raised a brow. "You seem upset."

"Yes, I'm—" He growled in frustration, grabbed my phone off the chaise, and turned off the music blaring from the speakers. The apartment plunged into silence, and he tossed my phone back on the cushions between us. I could see the wheels spinning in his head as he clenched his jaw, like he had so much to say he wasn't sure where to start.

My smartass mouth could help with that.

"At a loss?" I said. "You could just say thank you."

That did it.

"*Thank you?*" he said, his words coming out low and deadly. "You want me to thank you for what you did tonight? And don't bother trying to deny it. I know it was you."

“Who’s denying it? But you should know, it was more a group effort than a one-man show.”

“Are you seriously making jokes right now?”

“No, I’m just trying to work out why you’re so pissed.”

Gavin’s left eye twitched as he vibrated with fury, and I could’ve sworn he began to shimmer and blur. Or maybe that was the lighting. Or the alcohol. Or the combination.

“I’m *pissed*, as you so eloquently put it, because for the first time in months I was out on a date with someone who made me feel special. Who didn’t make me feel like he would lose his shit at the drop of a hat—”

“Well, good for you.”

“Yeah, it was good for me,” he fumed, and stormed around the chaise, pointing a finger at me. “Until East sent me a text with a video of you getting all dark and murderous.”

My lip curled. I was proud of that description. “I’ll be sure to tell him you enjoyed it.”

“You’re insane.”

“I thought you said ‘dark and murderous.’ Make up your mind.”

“What is your problem? Why do you keep doing this to me?”

“To *you*?”

“Yes, to me.” Gavin’s chest heaved in agitation. “You are not my bodyguard, Daire. I am not some broken, fragile piece of glass who needs you to step in and fight my battles for me. I had a moment, months ago—that doesn’t mean I’m weak. I thought I made myself clear the first time around.”

“Oh you did,” I fired back. “By shutting me out. Believe me, I got the message. But that doesn’t mean I’m not going to act when I find out Joey and his dickwad friends are bullying you.”

“I didn’t ask you to do that.”

“No, you didn’t. You didn’t even *tell* me about it. I had to find out from Nerd Boy that your asshole ex was still pushing you around. Why?”

“Because it wasn’t your business! Isn’t that what you always tell me?”

I took a step toward him. “This is different.”

“Why? I was handling it.”

“You weren’t doing shit. Otherwise they would’ve stopped.”

That was apparently the wrong thing to say, because Gavin lost it. He launched himself at me, his hands connecting hard with my chest. But I had

more weight on him, more balance, so when he grabbed hold of my shirt, I wrapped my fingers around his wrists.

“For someone who claims he doesn’t like violence, you have a nasty habit of putting your hands on me,” I said, dragging his hands down behind his back and holding him there. “But that was your last shot.”

Gavin aimed daggers my way, his irritation a tangible thing as it pulsed between us. The tension in the room hissed and sparked like a live wire.

“Can you blame me? You’re enough to drive anyone to violence.”

“Because I took care of a problem *you* let get out of control?”

Breathing hard, Gavin struggled against my grip. “I hate you.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you do. Still doesn’t explain why you didn’t tell me. Why you didn’t let me help you.”

“Because I know you, Daire. You don’t know when to stop. You’re an animal.”

Something in me snapped. I jerked him forward, our bodies flush and our noses almost touching as I said, “That’s right. I *am* an animal. And I’ll eat you alive if you fucking let me.”

It wasn’t anger or fear that lit Gavin’s eyes at my words—it was desire. As if the thought of doing just that turned him on.

I didn’t think then. I just acted.

I slammed my mouth down on Gavin’s in a kiss so fierce, so possessive, that he gasped, his entire body going so still I wondered if I’d shocked him to death.

Before my brain could kick in to make me conscious of what I was doing, Gavin’s mouth parted—and then he was kissing me back. With the adrenaline riding both of us, nothing about what we were doing was tentative. All rational thought flew out the window as the sweet taste of his lips penetrated my inebriated state, and suddenly all I could think about was stealing a deeper, longer draw of him.

I let go of Gavin’s wrists, bringing my hands up to cradle his flushed cheeks. His lips parted on a gasp, and before I could tell myself what a monumentally stupid idea this was, I took the kiss that I craved.

My tongue entered Gavin’s mouth with only his groan as permission. But the hands back on my shirt hauling me closer confirmed what I already knew—he wanted this as badly as I did, and if that wasn’t confirmation enough, the hard dick rubbing up against mine sure was.

Gavin’s tongue tasted like that drink I knew he favored. Rich like port, with hints of spice to it. A taste I knew I’d never forget after tonight, as I swept my tongue around the honeyed interior of his mouth.

It was like an instant hit, a one-two punch that sent a buzz rushing so fast through my veins that it overpowered any other sense, any other thought, other than when I could get another. I bit and sucked at the pouty lips that had just been cursing me to hell.

My head began to spin, the living room starting to feel completely off balance, along with the rest of my world, as the reality of *whom* I was kissing slammed into me.

Abruptly, I jerked away, and the sight of Gavin’s swollen mouth and dazed eyes was enough to wake me up.

Holy shit, what had I just done? This was *Gavin*, for Christ’s sake. Quiet, sweet, and undeserving of having the likes of *me* mauling him. What the hell was I doing kissing him?

I dropped my hands from him like he was on fire and stumbled backward, knocking my ass into the chair. Frustration ripped through me, and I kicked it out of the way as Gavin started toward me.

“Daire, wait.”

I would not stick around for whatever he wanted to say, not when I could feel my body going into shock.

Without another glance, I hightailed it away from him, ignoring him when he called after me. It wasn’t until I stepped across the threshold of my bedroom that I finally answered him.

By slamming my door and locking it up tight.

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# SIXTEEN

## *gavin*

THE SECOND DAIRE'S door slammed shut, I knew he wasn't coming back out again. But with the way his kiss had just scrambled my brain, I couldn't stay here and try to think clearly. Not when every fiber of my being was suddenly attuned to his.

I had to get out of there.

Pushing through the shock that wanted to keep my feet rooted to the floor, I somehow made my way out of the apartment, going to the one place in this building I looked to as a sanctuary.

This late, there was no one else in the Secret Garden, and even the fire had long since been snuffed out. Only a few strands of twinkling lights lit the space as I headed toward my usual spot and fell down onto the velvet couch.

What in the fresh hell had happened tonight?

And why was it that every time I went on a date with Trevor, something dramatic happened and I couldn't even remember it? Like East sending me a video of him and the guys inflicting punishment on my ex and his friends. Or fighting with Daire, and Daire—

*Kissing* me.

So much had happened in the last few hours, but that was all I could focus on. Maybe it was because I could still feel his hands holding me, the way his mouth had taken possession of mine.

I traced my swollen lips with my fingers, still dazed at how quickly our confrontation had turned into something more. I'd been so damn mad at

him, and all I'd wanted to do when I saw him standing in our living room, so calm and unconcerned, was strangle him.

Not *let him kiss me*, for God's sake. Not kiss him back.

Definitely not want to do it again…

Sinking back onto the couch, I kicked my feet up and closed my eyes.

*Stop thinking about Daire. Think about the way he and the others went behind your back instead.*

That was easier said than done with my lips still tingling and my stomach twisting itself into knots.

Needing a reminder of what had gone down, I pulled my phone out of my pocket and brought the video up.

The smirk on East's face before he panned the camera around Astor's courtyard was enough to tell me he was out somewhere patting himself on the back now, probably with the rest of our fucked-up crew. Why Daire hadn't joined them, I didn't know, but for the moment I put that aside, because the sight of Joey and his friends naked and spread out for public view was nothing short of shocking.

And what was that on their necks? They all seemed to have the same drawing of… I hit pause and zoomed in, squinting at what looked like… dicks? What, so they'd Sharpie'd dicks leading up to their mouths? That seemed a little pedestrian, especially for East—

*Oh my God.*

They hadn't *drawn* those on.

Light glinted off the cling wrap covering the designs, which meant those were fucking *tattoos*.

My jaw hit the floor as I pieced together what they'd done. It was obvious Carl and Doug were knocked out cold somehow, but Joey seemed at least half awake and utterly terrified as Daire crouched down in front of him.

They'd been given something to keep them from putting up a fight, that much was clear. And then what? Taken to get dick tattoos before being left on Astor's doorstep for everyone to see?

Conflicting emotions warred in me, and even knowing how messed up it was, I couldn't help but laugh. After all the shit those three had given me for months, for my friends to shut those bastards up that way? It was priceless. I couldn't help but feel relief and even gratitude at seeing the way they'd been dealt with.

I didn’t have to defend myself from those guys anymore.

I didn’t have to dread walking down the halls of Astor and worrying about who was lurking around the next corner.

That was all taken care of.

I rested my head back against the couch and shut my eyes, feeling the weight I’d been carrying around, the fear I’d lived with, finally leave my shoulders. I felt lighter, more at ease than I’d felt in months—and with that realization, any residual anger I felt toward my friends disappeared.

How could I be angry when they’d just given me back my freedom? When they’d just—what had Daire said?—taken care of a problem I let get out of control?

It wasn’t like I’d been able to stop it. But after tonight, I had a feeling I’d seen the last of them. God knows I wouldn’t want to be on Daire’s bad side—I’d seen the kind of damage he could do. But I had to admit, something about the way he’d stood up for me, the way he’d promised vengeance if Joey ever came near me again, made my heart do this weird kind of skipping thing, similar to what happened when his mouth had slammed down onto mine…

Why had he kissed me like that? It wasn’t like we’d been on the best terms lately. If anything, we’d been at each other’s throats. The debacle with my breakup months ago had led to a chasm that seemed to widen more with each day. And after our argument the night I followed him to his underground fight club, I’d thought for sure we were on the outs. But then, why had he kissed me?

It hadn’t just been a quick mistake of a kiss, either—it had been a fierce, crushing, passionate kiss that went from punishing to life-altering in seconds. In one instant I’d been wanting to strangle him, and the next I would’ve done anything for him to drag me to his bedroom and—

I jackknifed up on the couch, my eyes popping open.

What the hell was the matter with me? Here I was after one of the best dates of my life, and instead of thinking about the charming, good-looking man I’d run out on, I was fantasizing about Daire.

*Daire…*

The guy who barely grunted a good morning to me. Who only had one expression: a scowl. The guy who beat people up for fun, and got pissed off if you dared to worry about his well-being.

This was the guy I was imagining dragging me into his bedroom? Was I fucking insane? I had to be, because only an idiot would catch feelings for someone like Daire. And only a masochist would want him to touch them.

I was neither. At least, I didn't think so. But I also couldn't remember the last time I'd had such a *reaction* to someone. For so long now I'd been walking around in a kind of funk. I'd become a hostile shadow of myself. Maybe it'd taken another grumpy asshole to make it all come crashing down. Like two lighting bolts slamming into one another across the sky.

Great, now I was thinking of his mouth crushing mine. The electricity I'd felt humming between us, and his hands… *Damn*. The way he'd held my face with those strong fighter hands? He'd been so gentle, so protective of me, even with his anger riding him. Not once had I felt scared or in danger with Daire, which was crazy, considering what a maniac he could be.

I thought back to the argument that led up to that combustible moment between us, the words we'd hurled at each other, and while most of it had been defensive and aggressive, one thing stood out to me—Daire's angry acknowledgement of my distancing myself from him.

The fact that he'd noticed was shocking enough. But the mocking way he'd tried to shield his feelings about it made me wonder…

Did Daire actually *give* a shit about me? Did he *care* what happened to me?

If someone had asked me that last month, or even a couple of weeks ago, I would've laughed in their face. But now I wasn't so sure.

That kiss. The way he'd threatened Joey. The hurt I could've sworn I saw flash across his face when I told him not to fight my battles. It all spoke of feelings, emotions that, quite honestly, I hadn't been sure Daire was capable of—still wasn't, really.

No. That wasn't true. There had been more emotion in our apartment tonight than either one of us had known what to do with. Emotion that had driven us into each other's arms and thrown our entire situation into total, utter chaos.

What the hell did I do now? It wasn't like I could erase my memory. I wasn't even sure I wanted to.

I'd never thought of Daire Connery in any way other than the surly bastard with the permanent scowl. But now all I could think about was how damn good that scowl felt against me.

*Fuck.* This was going to get complicated.

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# SEVENTEEN

## *gavin*

IT'D BEEN DAYS since I'd seen Daire. I had no idea where he'd gone off to, and if any of the others had a clue, they weren't saying.

If Daire thought this made things easier after kissing and running, he was a fool. All it'd done was make me wonder what had scared him so much.

It also had me thinking about him nonstop.

When he came back, would he act like nothing had happened? Would I? Daire wasn't someone who sat around talking about his feelings, so that told me I'd never get closure on the kiss.

Unless…he did it again.

I swallowed, pushing that thought all the way to the back of my mind. It had happened. It wasn't going to again. The moment of madness had been just that. We'd been hyped up on adrenaline. Anger. Then we acted on it. Nothing more.

"Dismissed."

I blinked my professor back into focus at the bottom of the lecture hall and realized I'd been zoned out for the entire hour. The cursor on my laptop blinked at me, the page still empty of any notes as everyone around me packed up and started to leave.

Well, shit. I hoped whatever he'd gone over wasn't something that would come back to bite me on the ass in the form of a surprise test.

Shoving everything into my bag, I got to my feet and slipped out of the room before my professor could call me out for being a zombie. It felt good not to have to worry about anyone waiting for me, not when Joey and his

friends hadn’t been back to school since their…unfortunate incident. From what I heard, it wasn’t even a sure thing that they *would* be coming back, not after the utter humiliation of the entire school seeing them naked, bound, and tattooed. Apparently East had made another video, one without him or our friends, and anonymously sent it to every student at Astor. Many of whom had gone down in the early-morning hours to see the scandal for themselves.

Just as Donovan had reassured me, there hadn’t been any blowback whatsoever on us. Rumors spread about Joey’s parents being livid and demanding names, but neither him nor his friends were saying a word.

Daire really was one scary motherfucker.

As I rounded a corner, my feet came to a sudden stop.

*Shit.* They were back.

Dressed in turtlenecks that covered their new ink, Joey, Carl, and Doug huddled together at the end of the hall, only this time they weren’t surrounded by their usual band of loyal followers.

In fact, several of the people standing nearby were whispering and laughing as Joey seemed to avoid their gazes.

Part of me felt supreme satisfaction at seeing them ostracized, but the other part of me felt that familiar anxiety start to creep up like an old friend. Just looking at them, seeing them standing together like they were waiting to give me shit…

No. They wouldn’t be doing that anymore. My friends had made sure of that.

Forcing my shoulders back and my feet to move, I headed down the hall in their direction, since there wasn’t another way to go unless I turned around—and I wouldn’t be doing that anymore.

Joey looked up, our eyes connected, and I saw the blood drain from his face. He whispered something to his friends, and they all nodded and left. Like hauled ass away from me as fast as they could without running. I couldn’t hide my surprise at their reaction as my jaw dropped.

No freakin’ way. One look at me and they’d tucked tail and run. Why the hell had I been mad at Daire again? I should’ve let him and the guys insert themselves into this situation a long time ago.

The relief was almost overwhelming as I headed to meet up with my friends during a lull in classes. For the first time in a long time, I was able

to walk the halls without ugly taunts or hands on me. It was a slice of freedom I hadn't even known I'd been missing.

The guys were all in their usual spot, a meetup room we'd commandeered that used to be a teachers' lounge. Couches and chairs were packed in, enough seating for all of us even as our group kept growing with the addition of JT. As I stepped inside, I couldn't help the smile that was dying to burst out.

"They're back."

"You just said that with a big-ass grin on your face." West smirked, lounging on one of the couches with JT pulled into his lap. "Lemme guess, you got to appreciate Simone's skill with a tattoo gun."

"The oozing bit was my idea," Travis said, looking way too proud of himself.

I shook my head and dropped my bag on the floor. "Actually, I didn't. They've covered that shit with turtlenecks and scarves."

"Pussies."

My head whipped around to find the person that deep voice belonged to. Daire sat on one of the window ledges staring out to the courtyard. His booted foot was propped up in front of him, bent at the knee, and the other stretched out as he lounged back against the wooden frame.

It was the first time I'd seen him since our… incident, and the sight of him made my stomach do a somersault.

"Not so brave now, are they?" West chuckled as JT shook his head.

"What's the problem, Golden Boy?" East said, crossing one leg over the other. "You don't approve of your boyfriend's actions? He was just standing up for his friend."

JT ignored East, his soft brown eyes finding me. "I'm sorry for what they were doing to you. If I'd known, I could've—"

"What? Gone and told your mommy the dean?"

"Knock it off, East." West glared his best friend down.

"All I'm *saying* is…" JT squeezed West's leg. "I could've helped."

"Aww that's so sweet, babe." West pulled JT into his arms and kissed his temple. "But I didn't want you to get in trouble or have to lie to your mom."

East rolled his eyes. "Ugh, enough with the lovefest already. Can we go back to talking about what a genius I am to have come up with such a masterful plan?"

Preston chuckled. “Pretty sure that’s all we’ve talked about for the last few days.”

“No one asked you, fatherfucker.”

“I’d rather be a fatherfucker than have carpal tunnel from overusing my hand. Maybe if you put half as much effort into looking for a date, you might not be so hung up on us praising you every five minutes.”

East waved his hand in the air as though he were bored with the conversation. “Praise kink is so not my scene. But I bet you’re a really good boy for Daddy Archer.”

Preston grinned. “You don’t know the half of it.”

Travis sat down beside Preston and scooted in close. “But we’d like to.”

East scrunched his nose up. “Speak for yourself.”

“I am.”

As the guys continued back and forth, I made my way over to an empty spot on one of the couches, their voices fading into the background as I zeroed in on the only person in the room not participating in the discussion.

Daire had an arm propped up on his knee and his eyes closed as he leaned back against the frame. The morning sun streamed through the window and caught his raven-colored hair. The stubble shadowing his jaw line was darker than usual, emphasizing the harsh lines of his face, and as though he could feel me staring, he opened his eyes and looked my way.

My breath caught on impact. His stare was as subtle as a freight train. I tried to swallow, tried to look away, but it was like I was caught in a snare, and only Daire could release me. Thoughts of his mouth moving over mine, his tongue tasting me, flashed through my mind.

*Jesus.* My pulse was thrumming so hard, the blood rushing down between my thighs, and when my dick started to throb, I shifted on the couch.

“Right, Gavin?”

“Huh?” I picked up my bag, clutching it over my lap, and whirled around to face the rest of the guys. “What?”

Travis smirked. “I was just saying, I doubt Joey’ll be bothering you again.”

“Yeah, um, I don’t think so.” Especially not after Daire had put the fear of God in him.

“Well, if they do, you better tell us, okay?”

I was just about to answer my brother when Daire said, “He will.”

I saw how it was. He wasn't talking *to* me, just *for* me. I narrowed my eyes on the grouchy bastard. "*He* is right here and can answer for himself."

"Then answer."

Ugh, he was so infuriating. How was I supposed to do that if he was talking over the top of me?

"I promise to let you know if Joey comes anywhere near me."

"Or his dickwad friends."

I shot lasers in Daire's direction. "*Or* his dickwad friends. Happy?"

"Fuckin' ecstatic."

"See?" East gestured between Daire and myself. "This is the kind of discourse I enjoy."

"Fuck off," Daire and I said at the same time. But as Daire turned back to look out the window, I could've sworn I saw the corner of his lips twitch.

"So, Preston, my old buddy, old pal." Travis slung his arm across the back of the couch. "Were you able to get any more info on that new band coming to Astor in a couple weeks? I know Archer is off the gig 'cause you two, you know, but he still reps the band."

"Info such as…?"

Donovan snorted. "As if you have to ask. He wants to know if there's any potentials he can hook up with."

"Hey now." Travis held up a hand. "Are you trying to imply that I'm a—"

"Whore?" East interjected. "Yes. Yes they are."

"Oh." Travis smiled like a fiend. "Well then, carry on."

"All I know is that they're a new band Archer has high hopes for, and they're in their mid-twenties."

"Hot or fugly?"

"Travis." JT scrubbed a hand over his face. "I swear, you guys need to learn how to filter your thoughts."

"Why?" Travis looked around the group. "I'm with friends—well, and Daire."

Daire flipped him off, and just when I thought he'd go back to staring out the window, those obsidian eyes tracked back to me. I could hear Preston giving Travis more details about the band members, but just like before, I was caught up in whatever trance Daire had me under.

Did he feel it too? He kept looking over at me.

Daire’s attention shifted to my lips, and the hand resting on his bent knee balled into a fist.

It was the first indication that he was aware of me in any way other than as another body in the room. That he might’ve been thinking of the kiss that we’d shared, because I sure as hell was. I felt flushed, too hot all of a sudden, and the ache between my thighs intensified.

But then his eyes flicked back up to mine and he gave that usual scowl even as he arched a brow that basically screamed: *There a problem?*

And as much as I wanted to be cool about it, to flip him off or scowl right back at him, all I could do was sit there and stare. Because there *was* a problem. A really, really big one.

I wanted Daire.

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# EIGHTEEN

## *daire*

RED LIGHTS FLASHED across the interior of Luxe as another pair of male dancers in sky-high stilettos took to the stage in our roped-off corner of the members-only club. They both wore barely-there G-strings that showed off their toned physiques as they each commandeered a pole and began to grind to the music.

“Why do we ever go anywhere else?” Travis said, his gaze transfixed on them as he stood up from his front-row seat and motioned for one of the guys to come closer. After he slid a Benjamin in the thin strap of the dancer’s G-string and winked, the man grabbed Travis’s hand and slapped it on the muscular curve of his bare ass cheek.

“You did it now. He’s not going to leave you alone the rest of the night,” East said, shaking his head as he watched the naughty display sprawled out across a couple of chairs with his well-polished loafers kicked up on the stage—giving absolutely no fucks, but being more than generous with the wad of cash in his lap.

I took a drag of my cigarette, holding the smoke in my lungs for a long moment before blowing it out in East’s face.

He turned his head in my direction, eyes narrowed. “Do you mind?”

“Not at all.”

Annoyed, he sought out a head of platinum hair and snapped his fingers. “Gavin, come get your bodyguard.”

Gavin stopped mid-order with the waiter and glared at East. “You did not just snap at me.”

“I did. Your roommate wants you.”

“What?” Immediately, Gavin’s eyes shot to mine, and the mix of surprise and confusion wasn’t the only thing I saw in those grey depths. There was an intensity there that had appeared after I kissed him, and I didn’t know how to make it go away other than ignoring him. Or trying to.

I broke eye contact and flicked the ashes of my cigarette into a glass tray. “He’s fucking with you.”

“Oh.” I could almost hear the disappointment in Gavin’s voice, or maybe I was just projecting. God knew I didn’t need him to think of me in any way other than his asshole roommate he had to put up with. Kissing him had been a mistake, one I wished I could erase—if only so I didn’t know how fucking sweet he tasted.

Remembering the way Gavin’s lips had opened for mine, so easily, so eager and willing, had my cock punching hard against the confines of my jeans. I wished like hell I’d had some damn self-restraint.

I couldn’t be attracted to Gavin. He’d gone through enough punishment with destructive shits to last a lifetime, and I wouldn’t add myself to the list. He wasn’t even my type, for fuck’s sake. He enjoyed being in relationships, and I limited myself to fucking red flags who refused to commit. That was what worked for us. All this overprotective crap I’d felt lately was only because I didn’t like anyone preying on someone as vulnerable and likable as Gavin.

Although…he seemed to like putting up a helluva fight with me, didn’t he? Leave it to me to rub off and bring out that bullheaded side of him. Anything to bring someone down to my level.

*Fuck.* I stabbed what remained of my cigarette into the tray and shoved my chair back.

I should’ve stayed out in East Hampton at my parent’s empty estate for a few more days, even though I hated the beach. These looks Gavin was shooting my way told me he wasn’t over the insanity that had come over me and made me kiss him. My body wasn’t reacting in a way that was any better, though. Something that annoyed me to no end.

Ignoring the guys’ stares—especially Gavin’s—I blew past them, heading to the bar. I didn’t even know why I bothered staying, other than not wanting to be alone with my thoughts. Arguing with East was better than the shit that lurked in my brain.

“Tequila,” I said, not bothering to sit. The bartender nodded, flipping up a shot glass and pouring the liquor inside. I grabbed it, and a second later

the liquid was burning a path down my throat.

I closed my eyes, savoring the fiery warmth that flooded my body, as I did my best to block out everything around me.

Why had I agreed to come out, again? I really should've gone to the late-night fight I'd been texted about. That would've been more satisfying, and probably a hell of a lot smarter, considering where my thoughts kept going when it came to a certain someone.

Maybe I could ditch the guys, peace out early, and still get there in time to throw down a couple rounds. It would beat sitting here for the next couple hours trying to ignore the way Gavin kept looking at me.

And he *was* looking—a little too long, a little too hard. It was driving me fucking crazy.

My mind made up, I gestured for one last shot before I hit the road, and as the bartender slid it across the counter, I heard a trilling laugh I'd know anywhere. It was a sound that immediately set my nerves on edge and had my body tensing.

I glanced down the bar past several people who were placing orders, and there at the other end, perched on one of the high barstools, was a beautiful woman surrounded by a crowd of attentive men and a couple of women. She was dressed in killer heels, a leather mini skirt, and a corset top that barely contained what was underneath, and her thick waves of inky black hair flowed over her shoulders.

My eyes narrowed on the group as her familiar laugh once again filled my ears and she threw her head back.

I slammed the shot glass down on the bar top and started toward the crowd. I scanned the club, searching for her other half, but it was too dark, too packed, to see beyond the immediate swarm of people.

Several clubgoers cursed me out as I shoved through couples and friends gathered at the bar, but I didn't care. My focus was on finding out what in the hell *she* was doing here.

When I got to her group of adoring fans, I shouldered past a few of them, but the last guy—the one who'd just made her laugh—wasn't budging, and when a quick shove didn't get him out of my way, I grabbed his arm, ready to throw him if need be.

"You mind?" He glared down at my hand.

"No, I fucking don't." I tightened my grip and pushed him out of my way.

The path cleared, and smoky, dark eyes landed on mine as her painted red lips curved into a sultry smile.

“What the fuck are you doing here, Claudia?” I demanded.

“Daire, is that any way to speak to your mother?”

Now that was a fucking laugh. Mother? The only thing Claudia knew about being a mother was how to spell it.

Her crowd of pathetic hanger-ons stared between the two of us, probably trying to wrap their inebriated brains around the fact that the stunning woman who’d been entertaining them all for God knows how long was somehow related to the scowling bastard trying to glare her to death. But hey, they’d only known her for the fun couple of minutes or hours they’d spent with her. I’d known her my whole miserable life. Or, should I say, known *of* her, because she sure as fuck hadn’t stuck around to get to know me.

“I don’t have a mother.” I swept my eyes over her clubbing attire, the entire wardrobe something I’d expect from girls my age. But that was Claudia, always had been, chasing the sun, living the high life, refusing to settle down as long there was money in her bank account.

Lucky for her, she had a never-ending flow of cash from a hefty inheritance, so she could stay frozen in time, as young as she wanted, free from all responsibility—even after giving birth to a baby boy. That was what nannies were for. Or so I was told.

“Why do you always have to be so ugly, Daire?” She flipped her hair over her shoulder and swiveled back to face the bar. “I certainly didn’t raise you that way.”

“You didn’t raise me at all.” I moved in beside her, zeroing in on the painted nails picking up her martini glass. “Where’s Patrick?”

“You mean your father?”

“Don’t you mean my sperm donor?”

Claudia’s head whipped around and her dark eyes turned as cold and steely as mine—it was about the only thing we had in common.

“Don’t talk about him like that.”

“Why not? You never bothered to marry him.”

“Marriage is an archaic tradition—we don’t think like that.”

“Riiight.” I nodded, wondering if she actually believed the bullshit that came out of her mouth. “You both prefer to be able to sleep around *without* the guilty conscience. Whatever makes you happy.”

Claudia took a sip of her drink, her eyes narrowing on me over the rim. But if she thought I was about to apologize or make shit easy on her, she had another thing coming.

“You plannin’ to call me while you were here, or is that also an archaic tradition?”

She took another sip of her drink, and I almost kicked myself for asking. I already knew the answer. If I hadn’t run into her, I wouldn’t have even known she was in town.

“Why do you need me to call? You seem fine to me.”

“Do I?”

“Yes. And it’s not like you want for anything.” *Except maybe some kind of motherly love or affection.* “Your father and I made sure of that.”

“Yeah, my bank account keeps me all warm and fuzzy at night.”

“Stop being so glib.” She shook her dark hair down her back, straightening her spine. “You could have nothing. You’re lucky I even give—”

When she cut her words off, I scoffed and leaned in closer to her. “I’m lucky you even give me what? Money? Food? A warm place to sleep at night?” I picked up her glass and drained her drink. “Funny, but somehow I think it would’ve been warmer if you’d thrown me out in the fucking streets compared to what you’ve ‘given’ of your cold heart.”

“You ungrateful little—”

I shifted to my full height, towering over her, and she immediately swallowed her words.

“Yeah, not so little anymore.”

“You’re still ungrateful.”

“And you’re still a lousy excuse for a mother.”

Claudia’s cheeks flushed with anger, but before she could respond, I turned to get the fuck out of there. The last thing I needed was to run into Patrick, and now I *really* needed to hit something.

I was about to make a beeline for the door when my eyes landed on a shock of platinum hair a couple of feet away. From the look of utter bewilderment on Gavin’s face, I figured he’d caught every damn bit of my interaction with Mommy Dearest.

Great. All I needed was a witness to the shit-fest that was my life.

He started toward me, but I wasn’t doing this. I carved a path through the crowd and punched out the door onto the street, but before I could

disappear into the night, I heard him call out my name.

Choosing to ignore it, I kept walking. Eventually, he stopped yelling, and I figured he'd given up and gone back inside. Until a shove from behind me sent me stumbling, and I whirled around, arm already reared back to lay out whoever had dared to touch me.

Gavin's eyes widened, and I caught myself just in time to save his pretty face from a broken nose.

"Jesus, Daire, what the hell," he said, holding up his hands and breathing hard like he'd run after me.

I lowered my arm, but every muscle in my body remained tense. "Get lost."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me. Go back inside, slip a few bills in someone's G-string, and leave me the fuck alone."

He crossed his arms. "No."

"No?"

"You heard me. I'm not going anywhere."

"Yes. You are."

"What, you gonna make me? Throw me over your shoulder and force me back inside?"

"If that's what it takes."

The second the words were out of my mouth, Gavin's eyes heated, and I cursed at his reaction.

"That," I said, pointing at his face. "Stop looking at me like that."

He raised a brow and smirked. "Because you like it? Because it makes you want to kiss me again?"

*The little shit.* I needed to deny it, since nothing would be more idiotic than kissing Gavin a second time, but something kept my mouth shut. Maybe it was the flush creeping up his neck that I wanted to feel with my fingers. Or maybe it was the way I knew his mouth would fit so perfectly under mine…

"No," I said, slapping myself out of those thoughts. "I won't be that stupid again."

A flash of hurt or disappointment, I couldn't tell which, crossed Gavin's eyes, and I immediately wanted to take back those words. Not that I didn't mean them, because I didn't need to have my lips anywhere near his—

“Why didn’t you ever say anything about your parents? This whole time I’ve known you, not one word. Not to me, not to the others.”

Instantly, the brick wall I used to keep everyone away and out of my business went back up, and I scowled. “What, you’re gonna feel sorry for me now? Don’t.”

“Why not? You apparently feel sorry all the time for me, thinking I need protection twenty-four seven, but I don’t.”

“Your point?”

“My point is, if your parents are terrible humans—and from what I just saw, you’re not exactly on the best terms—you can vent that shit to your *friends*.” He spread his hands wide. “Like me. Like Van. Any of us. And don’t tell me we’re not your friends, because whether you like it or not, you’re stuck with us.”

“I’m not spilling my life story to make you feel better.”

“You never spill *anything*. Not a word. Don’t you get that we don’t have some ulterior motive? We just want to know you. *I* want to know you. I want to understand you.”

*Understand* me? Why? Giving him my sad little backstory wouldn’t accomplish a thing, and it wasn’t something I wanted to think about anyway. Why bother?

“There’s nothing to know,” I said.

Gavin dropped his head back with a groan. “God, you’re so frustrating.”

“Then do what I said—go away.”

I turned away from him, but his hand landed on my bicep. “I have a better idea.”

“I’m not going back inside.”

“I’m not asking you to. You don’t want to face down your crazy mom? Well, things have been crazy for me too. So why don’t we blow off some steam and have fun for a change?”

“Fun,” I repeated. “You want to punch a few fuckers, that it?”

“No.” A small smile curved Gavin’s lips. “But I do want to go and kick some ass. You in?”

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# NINETEEN

## *gavin*

THERE WAS NO doubt in my mind where Daire had been headed when he left Luxe. He would've gone underground, beaten up a few guys, and come home in the early-morning hours with bruised knuckles.

After that epic confrontation with his mother—something I was still reeling from witnessing—it was understandable Daire would want to blow off some steam. I couldn't even blame him for wanting to hit something, so I took him somewhere he could do just that.

He brought what was left of his cigarette to his lips and stared up at the sign over the door we'd stopped in front of. Shaking his head, he blew out a stream of smoke, but all I could focus on was his mouth—the way it pursed as the clouds of smoke curled up and into the night, and the way his tongue dipped out to wet his lips.

"A pool hall? *This* is where you wanna blow off steam?" he said.

"And kick some ass. Don't forget that part."

As I pulled open the door, Daire stayed right where he was, like he was debating whether to go in or tell me to screw off. But then he sighed and put out his cigarette on the bottom of his boot before heading inside the busy pool hall.

This wasn't the kind of place Daire went to often, that was for sure. I'd been to most of them throughout the city, though I'd had to change up the locations often. Regulars weren't fond of pool sharks.

"We already know how this is gonna end," Daire said as we both scoped out the scene.

I smirked. "Admitting defeat already?"

“This is the only place you can kick my ass, and you know it.”

“True. But I don’t plan to kick yours tonight.” When Daire lifted a brow in question, I nodded toward a table of two guys already playing. “We’ll be kicking *theirs*.”

Daire followed my stare, and as we watched them take their shots, I filed away what I could see as our future opponents’ strengths and weaknesses. Although once they got a look at me, I doubted they’d see me as a threat. For some reason, most didn’t until it was too late. Donovan called it my “angel effect,” that because I had what he deemed a sweet innocence about me, it was easy to catch others off guard. So I did what anyone in my position would—I played into it. And won a shit-ton of money every time I did.

“A couple of beers,” I told the bartender, and had to put my hand over Daire’s mouth before he could protest.

Once the bartender walked off to grab our order, I lowered my hand, and Daire cursed.

“A beer? You don’t even drink those.”

“I don’t?” He was right, but it was the fact that he’d noticed that sent a flutter through my chest.

“No. You don’t. And neither do I.”

“We do tonight. Trust me.”

As the bartender dropped off our beers and uncapped them, I slid some cash across the bar.

Daire was looking at the bottle as though it were full of piss. “Care to fill me in on whatever’s goin’ on in your head?”

I forced myself to take a sip of the beer without making a face. “First, we’ve both already had a few drinks, and we don’t need to get sloppy. Second, holding a beer makes us nonthreatening—” I stopped and realized whom I was talking to. “Well, makes *me* less of a threat, and you need all the help you can get, you scary bastard.”

I swore I almost saw Daire crack a smile at that, but if he had, it was gone quickly.

“Once they see you make your first shot, they’ll be onto you.”

“Maybe. Or maybe I’ll just have some help from a better player.” I shrugged. “Someone to show me the ropes. I might just have beginner’s luck.”

Daire snorted and shook his head. “Never would’ve taken you for a hustler.”

“I guess there’s a lot we don’t know about each other,” I said, twisting to face him. Part of me stirred at getting to show Daire a side of me he hadn’t seen, showing him something I was good at. All he’d seen me as lately was a victim, and that’s not who I was. Not by a long shot.

Another reason I didn’t need another, stronger drink? Because I wasn’t sure I’d be able to resist trying for another kiss if I had more alcohol in me. Right now, we just needed to reset our friendship and have a good time. Not the easiest thing to do when all I seemed to notice now was how dangerously attractive Daire was. How had I never noticed it before?

Oh, right. The perpetual scowl that warned everyone off, not to mention his oh-so-friendly demeanor. But I’d gotten a glimpse of what lay behind the mask, and it was too intriguing to forget.

“For this to work, I’m gonna need you to play along,” I said. “Whatever I say, just go with it.”

“Do I look like someone who follows?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll let you lead in other ways.”

It wasn’t often I surprised Daire, but I saw the quick flare of his nostrils, and there it was again. The heat between us sparking, but not yet igniting.

He took a long swig of his beer, barely masking his disgust, and then nodded toward the tables. “Let’s go fuck with these assholes.”

I grinned and tapped my bottle against his, and then let him lead us to the table.

“You two almost done?” Daire said to the guys as one called out the left corner pocket to make his final shot.

“No,” the one bent over the table said, and then aimed true, pocketing the eightball. He stood up and looked us over with an assessing gaze. “You can join the next round if you’ve got the cash.”

Pretending to frown, I tugged on Daire’s arm and said loud enough for them to hear, “What does that mean? We have to play for money?”

“You’re catching on.” The guy smirked, adjusting his backward ball cap. “That a problem?”

“We were hoping for our own table,” Daire said coolly, crossing his arms as I fidgeted with the sleeve of my shirt.

“That’s too bad. Not a free table around here for the rest of the night.”

Daire looked down at me, and I made a show of biting down on my lower lip nervously.

“I want to play, but—” I started, and Daire cut me off.

“Then we’re in,” he told the guy, who was grinning like he’d just won the lottery.

“Good. We’ll start at”—he glanced at his friend, who leaned in to whisper something in his ear—“five hundred.”

I blanched, playing my part. “Dollars?”

The guy shrugged. “If you can’t handle it—”

“We can handle it,” Daire said, and I wanted to laugh at how easily they were falling into our trap. Five hundred bucks for what we were going to sweep in a matter of minutes? Hell yes.

After peeling off a few bills and slapping them on the edge of the table, Daire grabbed a couple of cue sticks off the wall. He handed one to me, and I followed his lead by chalking up the tip.

After introductions—the guy in the hat was Dale, and his friend was something I couldn’t pronounce and decided to rename as Chip in my head—Dale racked up the balls.

“Tell you what,” he said, “we’ll let you break first.”

“You can do that,” I muttered, sticking close to Daire’s side.

He shook his head and pushed me toward the head of the table. “You have to learn sometime.”

“But—”

“Just do it like I showed you.” Daire moved in beside me, so close I could feel the heat of his body through his clothes and had to suppress a shiver. He moved one of my hands up the cue and reached around me to position the other near the bottom.

*Holy shit.* I’d never been so *surrounded* by him before, not even when he’d kissed me. It was all I could do to keep playing my part when all I *wanted* to do was sink into him.

“Now bend over.” His breath was warm on my neck as I followed along and tried not to take his words out of the context he meant them in. “Aim hard and fast.”

I nodded, and the warmth of him left me as he moved aside to let me break. I centered the cue ball, letting my hand slip so it rolled out of my grasp.

Chip and Dale didn't bother hiding their chuckles as I scrambled to grab the ball and put it back in place. Glancing over my shoulder at Daire like I needed the support, he winked at me—fucking *winked* at me—and I turned off the role I'd been playing and easily slipped into one I knew I did well.

My first shot slammed the cue ball into the others, breaking them swiftly and sending several into pockets.

"Oh fuck," I heard one of the guys say, but I ignored them as I zeroed in on my next shot.

And then my next.

And my next.

I swept the table without letting them take a shot, and when I landed the eightball in a center pocket, I straightened and smiled at their shocked faces. Then I scooped up the money and fanned my face.

"Five hundred, was it?"

Chip—no, that one was Dale—looked at the empty table, humiliation and anger replacing the initial outrage as he turned back to me. The realization he'd just been taken hit him like a swift uppercut to the jaw.

Huh, would you look at that? It seemed all this time spent around Daire had me thinking like him.

"You played us," Dale said, narrowing his eyes.

"Technically, I didn't play anyone." I leaned against the table. "I'm just that good."

"You're a fucking cheat." Chip stepped up beside his buddy, balling his hands into fists by his sides, and this was usually the part where I cut and run. As soon as I sank the eightball and pocketed the cash.

But I figured with Daire standing watch, I'd take a second to enjoy my moment in the spotlight.

"I didn't cheat."

Dale threw his pool cue on the table. "Then what would you call it?"

"Reading the room. You sized me up as someone you could beat. I sized you up as wrong."

"You hustled us. You're a shark."

"You held the table ransom for five hundred. I just freed the hostage."

Dale stepped toward me all but vibrating with fury, and before I could blink, Daire was in front of me, the discarded pool stick in his hand, the tip of it under Dale's chin.

“Take another step and I’ll shove this thing so far up your ass you’ll be using chalk as a Chapstick.”

My eyes widened at the threat, but I couldn’t help but think how hot it was to have Daire defending me. Like *super* hot.

“Fuck you and your little blond bitch.”

An ominous growl rumbled out of Daire, and I quickly sprang into action, reaching for his arm.

“D, stop. It’s just a game.”

I tugged on his shirt, hoping to get through to him before this turned into an *above*ground fight club. That was the last thing I wanted.

“Let’s just go,” I said. Daire looked down at where my hand rested on his arm, and I squeezed. “Please?”

He grunted and threw the pool stick aside, reaching for my hand.

*Daire* was holding my hand.

My breath caught as our fingers touched, and it was as if the entire world vanished and we were the only two there. The heat from his hand raced up my arm and infused my whole body. He tightened his grip and led me away from the table, away from danger, then pushed out onto the busy street.

The bustling sounds of the city were immediate as the doors swung shut behind us. Cars sped by and horns honked, but it was my thumping heart that filled my ears as Daire’s palm rubbed up against mine. The rush from minutes ago pulsed through my body as he pulled me into the alley that ran up the side of the pool hall.

What a fucking trip.

I felt high as a kite.

It was always fun outsmarting cocky assholes at the pool table, but tonight was a whole different kind of rush that had very little to do with hustling and everything to do with the man staring down at me as though I’d lost my damn mind.

“Are you crazy?” Daire ran an agitated hand through his hair, and I figured I must’ve been, because the more time I spent with him, the more I…*wanted* him. “How often do you do this?”

I was about to answer when Daire shook his head.

“You know what? It doesn’t matter. You’re not doing it anymore.”

“Excuse me?” I straightened against the brick wall, my high suddenly plummeting to earth like a plane that had lost its engines. “You don’t get to

tell me what to do."

"The hell I don't." Daire took a step forward. "What would've happened if I hadn't been there?"

I angled my chin up, ready to defend myself to the bitter end. It'd been hot having Daire step in and defend me, but that didn't mean I'd *needed* him to.

"I would've left as soon as I won. Just like I usually do. I'm quite capable of looking after myself."

"Yeah, that's super fucking obvious."

I let out a frustrated sigh and ground my teeth together. "Can you, for *once*, maybe stop thinking about me like I'm some pathetic kid who needs you to protect him?"

Daire slapped his hands up against the bricks by my head. "Trust me, that's the last fucking thing I'm thinking."

Something in his voice set my heart racing again, and the frustration from his patronizing comments switched to frustration of a different kind. This push and pull between us created a whole lot of friction. The kind that would spark and ignite if we were brave enough to let it.

"Then what *are* you thinking?"

Daire blinked, his eyes zeroing in on my mouth before flicking back up to mine. "Nothing good."

I searched his harsh features, the stern line of his lips and his granite-like jaw. The stubble that shadowed it and the dark brows that hooded his eyes.

Daire was a walking billboard for heartache. A danger sign if there'd ever been one. But that didn't stop me from putting my hands on his chest, or gathering all the courage I could.

It also didn't stop me from saying, "Maybe it would be better than good."

And before I could talk myself out of it, I leaned forward to brush my lips over his.

It was like something from a movie. The pool hall hustle, the rescue, the fight between lovers, and now the kiss. Except the second my mouth swept over the top of his, Daire yanked his head back and gripped my wrists.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"I…" My words stuttered to a stop as he released my hands and stepped away from me.

“I told you I didn’t want that.”

*Did he?* That wasn’t how I remembered it. He’d said he wouldn’t be stupid enough to kiss me again. Not that he didn’t want to.

“Okay, if that’s what you want.”

“It is.” Daire shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans as though he didn’t trust himself. “We should go.”

I looked out to the busy street he was staring at as though it was his only escape route. “Fine, let’s go.”

Daire’s jaw twitched at my easy acquiescence, but I wasn’t about to argue with him and let him ruin my night. We’d had fun in there. For a few minutes he’d even stopped treating me like something fragile, and instead treated me like he might a…date. He’d winked at me and held my hand, and just now, I could’ve sworn he wanted to kiss me.

Why did he keep denying himself something he wanted as badly as I did? Did he somehow think he was taking advantage of me? Maybe I needed to be more obvious. *Maybe* if he knew I wanted him then he’d finally admit he felt the same way back.

Hmm, now that was an idea. I could *show* him how much I wanted him.

Yes, that was perfect.

#OperationTortureDaire was now underway.

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# TWENTY

## *daire*

GAVIN WAS UP to something.

I'd ignored it the first time, the day after he tried to kiss me, when he walked out of his room for his breakfast routine wearing nothing but a pair of low-slung pajama bottoms and not a damn thing else.

He never did that. Not one time since he'd moved in had he walked around the apartment half-naked. Gavin was always so buttoned up, and even though I'd obviously seen him in a pair of swim shorts, it was different now.

Now I noticed his lean but strong physique in an entirely new way. Or should I say my cock did. I'd had to move behind the goddamn counter so he wouldn't see exactly what I thought of the way he was putting his body on display. No doubt he was pulling this shit because I hadn't given in to temptation, something I should've gotten a fucking medal for. I knew my self-control was strong, but he'd been seriously testing my limits.

I didn't know then it would only get worse.

The second day, Gavin walked out in only a pair of tight, tiny briefs that barely contained the morning wood threatening to burst out of it.

*Fuck.* Was he kidding with this shit?

Like he wasn't desperately trying to get my attention, Gavin opened the refrigerator door and stood there, letting me get a good look at the interior light reflecting off his smooth, creamy skin and spotlighting the sharp, defined lines of his body. Particularly the deep V that practically begged for my tongue to trace it down over the outline of his impressive dick.

*No. Not my tongue. Someone else's tongue.* But the thought of anyone else getting his mouth on Gavin had a surge of rage flooding my veins.

I cleared my throat and kept my tone bored and unaffected, even as my cock protested its confinement. "Trying to get a tan?"

When Gavin turned my way, his gaze traveled past me and he smirked. "Your coffee's overflowing."

*What?* I felt the sting of hot liquid reach my hand as it poured out of the mug and onto the counter. "*Shit*."

I jerked my arm away and shut off the machine, realizing I must've hit the brew button twice during Gavin's blatant display. Cursing, I reached for the towels hanging from the oven door, throwing one over the puddle on the counter and then kneeling to mop up the mess dripping down to the floor. It wasn't enough to soak up the spilled coffee. "For fuck's sake, bring me the—"

Gavin stopped beside me, his hips so close to my face I could see the way his dick twitched under my stare.

If I was a better man, I'd close those few inches with my mouth and give him what we both wanted.

But I wasn't. I wouldn't.

Snatching the paper towel roll out of his hand, I forced myself to ignore him and clean up the mess. His knowing laugh as he sauntered back to his room haunted me the rest of the damn day.

The day after that, I'd forgone the coffee to avoid another run-in, since, if the pattern held, he'd probably just come out naked. Luckily, he was fully dressed by the time we stepped into the elevator to head downstairs.

Not that it seemed to matter what he was or wasn't wearing. Because Gavin didn't move to the other side of the elevator as usual. Instead, he sidled up beside me, so close the entire side of his body was flush against mine.

"Do you mind?" I said.

"Not at all."

It was annoying as shit that for some reason I didn't mind him in my space either. I moved away, but he pressed up against me so I was trapped between him and the wall.

"Is there a reason you're suddenly sticking to me like flies on shit?"

Gavin's eyes widened a fraction, but then his lips curved into a grin.

“You really shouldn’t call yourself such horrible things, D.” The elevator door swooshed open, and he stepped out, calling back over his shoulder, “Even if it is accurate.”

I narrowed my eyes on his retreating back, and I wasn’t sure if it was my imagination, but I could’ve sworn he had a little more pep in his fucking step.

He was getting off on this. Whatever *this* was.

Messing with me…

Irritating me…

Teasing me…

He stopped at the front door to the lobby and then bent down to…tie his shoe? And as his pants stretched tight across his perfect ass, I realized his leather loafers didn’t *have* laces.

He was fucking torturing me. That’s what he was doing.

I was tempted to boot him in his sweet behind as I got closer, but just as I was about to pass him, Gavin straightened to his full height and I nearly ran in to him.

“For fuck’s sake.” The clean, fresh scent that was all Gavin infiltrated my senses, inviting me in. But I knew if I got any closer, I’d somehow even destroy that. “Would you get out of my way?”

“Maybe if you open your eyes a little more, you’d be able to see what’s in front of you.”

I wasn’t one for double talk and innuendos, but when Gavin arched a brow and then headed out to the Sprinter, my dick jerked.

Open my eyes, huh? Was that what he was trying to make me do? *See* him?

Like I’d been able to see anything else over the last few days. Whether he was parading around in PJs or his skimpy-ass briefs, the second I shut my eyes, I pictured him in a whole lot less. He was driving me out of my damn mind, and now he was touching me, invading my space? If he wasn’t careful, he was going to get a whole lot more than my “seeing” him.

That had led us to today.

I got up earlier than usual, wanting—no, *needing*—a cold shower before Gavin decided to show up and shake his ass or rub himself all over me. I’d thought about heading down to the tunnels last night to get my frustration out some other way. But for the first time in forever, I’d decided to forgo pain when it came to relieving tension.

I punched in a temperature on the shower's thermostat that I figured would numb the ache between my legs but *not* freeze my balls off, then stepped in front of the powerful jets. I'd opted for them over the rainfall showerhead, liking the feel of the solid pressure pounding into my muscles, as opposed to a gentle waterfall that did nothing to soothe me.

The spray wet my hair as water hit my back in all the right places. There were a couple of jets up high near my shoulder blades, some mid-back, and the final two nice and low, blasting either side of my tailbone. It felt amazing, and was the exact distraction I needed to rub one out—so I could sit next to Gavin on the way to school and not punch a hole through the roof of the van with my cock.

I grabbed the bottle of soap off the caddy and poured some into my hand, then started to lather myself up. The water sluiced down over my body, washing the bubbles down the drain as my nipples hardened from the cool temperature of the water. It should've been enough to keep my wayward dick from coming out to play, but one thought of sitting next to Gavin in the van had it waking up to greet the day.

*Un-fucking-believable.* My hard-on was obsessed with the guy. Fucking stupid for him.

I wrapped my hand around my stiff cock, then closed my eyes and tilted my head back under the spray, images of light hair and pale grey eyes immediately springing to mind. Never in a million years would I have imagined a day I'd be standing in my shower getting myself off to Gavin, but every time I closed my eyes, there he was.

That innocent face of his looking up at me, hovering over the top of me. Those full lips cursing me, smiling at me, sucking on me—

That last one was particularly clear.

I could see Gavin's pretty pink mouth stretched wide when I tunneled my thick length inside, as those eyes pleaded with me to stop—or keep on going? I never knew which.

My fist tightened as I imagined grabbing a fistful of his hair. Imagined fucking his mouth harder. I spread my legs a little, bracing my feet as I continued to destroy that sinfully sweet hole, and reached behind me to adjust one of the lower sprays.

As the jet hit the crease of my ass, my balls tightened, the added stimulation something I knew I could reimagine as Gavin's finger—or better yet, his tongue—as I roughly jerked myself toward climax.

My toes curled on the marble floor as my orgasm blazed a fiery path down my spine to my balls, and a second later I fuckin' shattered. The cold water did nothing to keep that explosion at bay.

My chest heaved as though I'd run a goddamn marathon, and as my dick finally surrendered and lay down to recuperate, the distinct sound of—*clapping?*—filled my ears.

I opened my eyes, and when they landed on Gavin perched on my bathroom counter, I cursed and rubbed at them. Even *after* that orgasm, I was still fixated on him.

"Now that's one way to wake up." Gavin jumped down off the counter, and I blinked, the fog in my brain finally lifting as I realized this was no hallucination.

Gavin was standing in my fucking bathroom and had just watched me get off—to *him*.

"I was coming to ask if you wanted a coffee to help with that, but it seems you have other ways of greeting the morning."

"What the hell are you doing in here?" I managed, more than aware the only things separating us right now were the shower's glass and his clothes.

"Watching you get yourself off, apparently." Gavin walked over to the glass, his hungry gaze tracking every one of the tattoos on my body until he reached my overly ambitious cock. "Were you fucking my mouth or my ass?"

Had Gavin been body-snatched?

When I didn't answer, his mouth curved into a sinful smile.

"So both. Good to know." He licked his lips and walked backward to the door, his eyes never once leaving mine. "Because that's exactly what I imagined too. Better hurry, if you don't want to be late."

As he disappeared out of sight, I let out a breath I didn't realize I'd been holding and turned off the shower. I grabbed a towel and wrapped it around my waist, then stared at my reflection.

*You fuckhead…* I ran a hand through my hair as I remembered the heated look in Gavin's eyes and the way my spent body immediately responded as though it'd been weeks since I'd come. Not seconds.

What in the holy hell had just happened? And how could I walk it back? It was a monumentally stupid idea to want to fuck your friend's brother, even if he had been relentlessly pursuing me.

Especially when that brother was as sweet and pure as Gavin.

But was he? That look in his eyes, those words he'd said—they were anything but innocent or sweet.

I couldn't think about that. Truth be told, there was only so many times a person could get rejected. Turning him down constantly would make Gavin lose interest soon enough, and then I wouldn't be tempted to lose my damn mind with him.

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# TWENTY-ONE

## *gavin*

I KNEW DAIRE would be a tough nut to crack, but this was ridiculous.

I'd paraded around in tiny briefs, rubbed myself against him, teased and tormented him for days, and where had it gotten me?

Alone in bed, that was where, lying alone and pumping my dick to the memory of him doing the same in his shower. He hadn't even bothered denying he'd been thinking of me. God, that was hot.

I knew Daire would be packing behind his jeans, but seeing him naked, all that water running down his strong, defined body… It was a miracle I hadn't melted on the floor. It was lucky his eyes had been closed while I watched, because I'd had time to wipe the drool off my chin and adjust my erection before he realized I was there.

Weeks ago I never would've thought twice about the bad boy of our group, and now he was *all* I could think about.

Something had to give. It was clear he wanted me but was resisting for whatever reason made sense to his complicated brain.

I needed a different approach. A way to force his hand before I ended up making a fool of myself and climbing him like a tree.

So I made a phone call, put on a suit that hugged my ass and showed off the outline of my hips in an indecent way, and called out for Daire to answer the door when Trevor arrived that night.

"Get it yourself," he called back.

"But I'm not wearing pants." A lie, obviously, but one that had Daire grumbling as his booted feet clomped toward the door.

"You're a pain in my ass," he grumbled.

I smiled at myself in the full-length mirror and ran my fingers through the front of my hair so it would sit right. “No, but you can be a pain in mine…”

Taking my time, I listened closely as Daire let Trevor inside, and my date tried to make friendly conversation.

“You must be Daire. We haven’t officially met.” There was a long silence, and I wondered if Trevor was getting a scowling stare-down. When he cleared his throat and let out a small chuckle, I knew I was right. “Not the handshake type. I get it. No problem.”

Daire grunted, and I rolled my eyes. He wouldn’t deign to even shake Trevor’s hand? What a grumpy bastard.

But a *hot* grumpy bastard.

“Will Gavin be out soon?” Trevor asked, his voice not coming out quite as confident as it had when he first entered.

“Don’t know.”

Another awkward silence passed, and I figured it was time to put Trevor out of his misery. And continue #OperationTortureDaire, of course.

I spritzed a little cologne on my wrists and behind my ears and then swung my door open wide. “Trevor, you’re looking gorgeous tonight.”

Both men whirled in my direction, and while Trevor’s eyes brightened when he saw me, Daire’s only narrowed.

Ignoring the grouchy one for the man actually smiling, I greeted Trevor with a kiss to his cheek that I let linger a little longer than usual.

“Well, hey there.” When he gave my waist a squeeze, I leaned into it, rubbing against him. “You look…amazing.”

“Thank you. Good enough to eat?”

“Definitely.”

I could feel the glower coming from Daire’s direction like laser beams. I knew how antagonistic I was being, but desperate times called for desperate measures, and my patience was at the end of its rope.

Running my hand down Trevor’s chest, I fingered the buttons of his collared shirt. “So where are we heading off to?”

“I got us a reservation at Neon Fig. It’s supposed to be impossible to get, but all I had to do was say my name, and…” He snapped his fingers and grinned proudly.

I’d been there more times than I could count, but I wasn’t about to tell him that. “Impressive,” I said, dropping my hand to tease at his belt. I

could've sworn I heard a growl come from behind me, and I tried to suppress a satisfied grin.

"And get this." Trevor reached into his pocket and held up a key. His excitement was palpable. "I got a new ride this week. A badass Aston Martin Vanquish. Holy shit, it's so smooth, it's like a lightweight rocket. Zero to sixty in three-point-six seconds and up to two hundred miles per hour. I've got a friend in the NYPD who gives me a heads-up where to take it for a spin. I'll give him a call tonight and see where we can go."

My smile dimmed a little, but I forced it back into place. Great. The guy was obsessing over his car more than me. That wasn't part of my plan. "Nice."

"Right?" Trevor said, turning toward Daire. "Isn't that awesome?"

With a blank expression on his face, Daire deadpanned, "So fucking awesome."

My date wasn't catching on to the disinterest, however. "It's only a two-seater, but I can always take you for a ride another time—"

"He's not interested," I said, reaching up to turn Trevor's face back to mine. "But I am. I'd love to be taken for a *ride*."

"Then it's a good thing I made sure we had enough time to drive around before we have to be there," Trevor said, and Daire snorted.

Good lord, Trevor was not picking up what I was putting down. I needed him to get on board and flirt back, for God's sake.

"Isn't that adorable," Daire said, amusement lacing his voice. "A little chauffeur action and sharing pasta on a date."

*Smartass*. He might've been giving remarks in jest, but I had a feeling that, underneath it, this exchange was rubbing him wrong.

*Good.*

"*Adorable* isn't the word I'd use. *Sexy* is." Pushing my luck, I lowered my arm behind Trevor, running my hand over the curve of his ass as I glanced back at Daire.

If he was bothered at all, he was doing a helluva job not showing it. He raised a brow as if to say, *Is that all?*

What a liar. He wanted me, I knew it, and once this door shut, he'd probably pace the room or bust out the alcohol until I got home. I'd have to make sure to drag this out to wind him up even more.

"Ready to ride?" Trevor asked, and I tried not to cringe. The attractive actor had nosedived quickly in my mind into someone overeager and car-

crazy, and that wasn't what got my rocks off.

But Daire didn't need to know that.

"Hard and fast, right?" I grinned at Trevor as he took my hand, and then looked over my shoulder to wink at Daire. "Don't wait up."

"I WAS LOOKING at a Lamborghini Gallardo or Aventador too, but everyone in Hollywood has one of those. Here too." Trevor stopped only to take a sip of his soda before continuing. "There are a few with Aston Martins, but not many have a Vanquish."

"I see. So you're special," I said, and sighed when the waiter passed yet again without asking me if I needed a refill.

I did.

"More like unique. Rare. Especially with the color—I mean, how often have you seen one in Viridian Green around here? It's so badass."

"You know, I didn't realize you were so into cars."

"I mean, aren't you? You probably have a hundred in a private garage, huh?"

Wrinkling my nose, I lifted my glass as the waiter passed by again, with no luck. "No. I have a driver."

"You don't have a car? Not even one?"

I shrugged. "Why bother?"

"Uh, because you can afford something killer. Because it'd be something of your own."

"Guess it's not really my thing."

"Not really your—" Trevor's gaze went toward the window to where the valet had parked his car so he could have a prime view watching over it. Which was all he was doing on this date. I hadn't expected that.

"What the hell?"

The alarm in Trevor's tone made me look out the window to see what the problem was. Maybe someone had looked at his car wrong.

A couple of police officers stood beside Trevor's precious new purchase, motioning for the tow truck with amber lights flashing to back up to the front of it.

"Are they—" Trevor choked, his eyes darting around the scene in horror. "They can't tow my car. Why would they do that? Fuck."

As he shot to his feet and ran out of the restaurant, something niggled in the back of my mind, but I couldn't place it. I watched as Trevor ran down

the sidewalk waving his hands to get the tow truck to stop. He gestured toward the car and seemed to be pleading his case to the officers, but with the way they were shaking their heads, it didn't look like it was working.

Well, shit. There went our night.

I was debating whether to get another drink, a double this time, or if the check would be better, when the thought percolating in my mind sprang to the forefront.

*Wait a second.*

Trevor had used valet when we arrived. Why would they park his car somewhere it could be towed? There were no other cars around getting towed—

Because there were *no other cars* parked nearby.

Because the signs above his Aston Martin clearly said *no parking*.

But that didn't make any sense. Clearly we needed to talk to a manager and get this all sorted with the valet drivers, because this shit was unacceptable.

Awareness slammed into me like a gunshot to the chest then, pinning me to my seat before I could move.

This wasn't a coincidence. This was a setup.

I knew it deep in my gut, and no one could convince me otherwise.

It wasn't the first or even tenth time I'd been to this restaurant, and who else had joined in on at least half of those visits?

Daire.

And who knew where we were going and what Trevor's car looked like, down to the details?

Daire.

Who was the one person who'd want to ruin my date to get back at me for spending the last week teasing and tormenting his ass, and also had the means to do it?

Motherfucking *Daire*.

A string of curses flooded my mind as I glanced back out at a hysterical Trevor pulling at the ends of his hair in frustration.

Screw the waiter. I wasn't gonna sit around and wait for his ass to show up.

Getting to my feet, I pulled out a few bills, more than enough to cover what we'd had, and slid them between the square glass candle holders in the center of the table.

I thought I’d finally push Daire to my way of thinking with my stunt tonight, but he’d managed to get ahead of me and ruin my plan.

And now, instead of kissing him, all I could think about doing was kicking him. Hard and somewhere he wouldn’t easily recover from.

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# TWENTY-TWO

## *daire*

MAN, IT WASN'T often I was proud of myself, but tonight I deserved a fucking medal.

Leaning back in the leather swivel chair in my room, I kicked my feet up on the matching footrest. The only thing that could have possibly made me feel better was if I'd been there to witnessed Trevor the Tool's precious car being towed away. A lone tear rolling down his cheek as it faded into the distance…

I didn't feel bad. I mean, why would I? It was Gavin's fault.

If he hadn't been so hellbent on torturing me these past few days, then he would still have a ride home tonight. As it was, I had a feeling he'd be calling up Scotty or Ubering it back home, since Trevor would no doubt be glued to his phone, trying to work out where to go to get back his precious cargo.

I glanced over at my guitar in the corner, wondering if maybe I should pen an ode to Trevor's misfortune. But in the end I opted for scooping up the rectangular tin sitting on the glass side table to my left and flipping open the lid. Yeah, this was what I needed. Nestled inside were several wraps, a small grinder, and some of the finest weed money could buy, Caviar Gold.

Setting the tin aside, I ground the weed down so it would burn more evenly, then I unfolded the wrap and brought it to my lips to wet it before loading it up.

There was something about the process I found rewarding, even relaxing, as I began to squeeze and roll the blunt between my fingers before snatching up my lighter to seal it. Then I started in on a second one.

I’d usually save this for a night out with the guys, but drinking wasn’t enough of a celebration for what I’d pulled off tonight. So I’d decided to pull out the big guns and enjoy.

I got to my feet and opened the small window in my room to allow some of the smoke to escape, then I slumped back down in my seat and lit up. The view of the skyline kept me company as I drifted off into my happy place.

The music had a nice, throbbing bass to match my mood—no need for my alternative bands tonight—as I blew smoke rings up above my head and let the last few days of torture leave my body.

I was about halfway through my first blunt when I heard the distinct sound of the front door being flung open, followed by a loud slam and stomping footsteps.

Footsteps, I noted with a big smile, that could belong to only one person.

Just as I’d predicted, Trevor hadn’t even bothered seeing Gavin home. Nope, he was probably busy trying to track down his one true love—his douchemobile.

“Daire!”

My name echoed up the hall and into my room, even over the bass pulsing out of my sound system. But if Gavin thought I was about to get up, he was out of his mind.

“Daire! I know you’re in—” Gavin came to a halt somewhere behind me as I blew out another set of rings, high above my head, knowing how much it pissed him off when I smoked in the condo. “What the hell are you doing?”

I brought my feet down from the footrest and toed the floor, spinning the chair until I was facing my fulminating roommate, who was standing in the doorway.

“I’m relaxing.” I brought the blunt up to my lips and inhaled before blowing out the smoke in his direction. “Well, I was until you stormed in here screaming.”

Gavin planted his hands on his hips, probably annoyed and irritated—but to me he looked like a pissed-off librarian. You know, someone who was trying to be all scary and mad but failed.

“I wasn’t screaming.”

“You drowned out my fuckin’ music. So you weren’t exactly whispering.”

“I—” Gavin’s teeth clicked shut as he stomped further into my bedroom, glaring down at me. “Did you get Trevor’s car towed tonight?”

It took everything I had to keep my shit-eating grin to myself. “Oh no. His car got towed?”

Gavin kicked at my booted foot. “Cut the crap, Daire. I know you did it. Let me guess, you tipped off the valet?”

I liked to think my stealthy moves were harder to work out than that, but clearly Gavin knew me better than I’d realized.

“I don’t know what you’re talkin’ about.” I spun back to face the wall of windows, but Gavin stormed around until he was standing between me and the skyline.

“Bullshit. Why else would Trevor’s car be towed when he paid someone to park it? Oh, I know—someone called up the valet and offered a pretty good tip if he parked illegally.”

“That’s a pretty crazy theory you’re running with there.” I held up my blunt. “Maybe the smoke’s getting to you.”

“Or maybe you are. You sabotaged my date.”

“And why in the hell would I do that?”

“Because you’re too chickenshit to admit that *you* want to date me.”

I snorted. “I don’t want to date you.”

“Riiight. Then why did you ruin my night out?”

“I keep telling you—”

“Lies.” Gavin shook his head. “That’s what you keep telling me *and* yourself.”

Gavin made to walk around me and out of the room, and before I knew it I was on my feet and grabbing his arm.

“I don’t care who you date,” I said more for myself than him, because the longer he stood there hurling accusations at me, the more I’d started to question my motives.

I’d had Trevor’s car towed tonight to prove a point to Gavin—to show him that two could play at this ridiculous game he’d been playing. I wanted to irritate and frustrate him. Make him see that I could be obnoxious and annoying too when I wanted to be.

That was it. Nothing more, nothing less. And definitely not because *I* wanted to date him.

“Really?” Gavin searched my face as though looking for some hidden answer there. But he was looking in the wrong spot.

It was my stupid cock punching against my zipper that would give me away. My stupid cock that was reacting to his parted lips and rosy cheeks.

“So you didn’t set out to ruin my night because you were jealous?”

“Jealous?” I scoffed and brought the blunt to my lips, taking a drag, then I blew several rings of smoke out across his parted lips. “Why would I be jealous?”

Gavin reached for the blunt and took a deep inhale. “Because your dick is in lust with me.”

His words were a whisper, a smoky kind of cadence to match the music and the mood. When I jerked back, he grabbed my shirt in his fist.

“Admit it, Daire. That hard-on is for me.”

*Fuck*, that was sexy. *He* was so goddamn sexy—

*No. Hell no.* This was Gavin. I could not be thinking what I was thinking.

“I can see it in your eyes, D. You want to… And I want you to…”

“No.”

Gavin leaned down and stubbed out the blunt, then straightened and stepped closer to me, putting his hand lightly on my waist. “No, you don’t want to? Or no, *this*”—he slid his hand down to the front of my jeans —“isn’t for me?”

My cock lurched at the possibility that Gavin was about to stroke it, but it could just calm the hell down. No way I was going to let this go that far. The fact he was cradling me through my jeans was a mind-fuck all on its own.

This was Gavin. *Gavin*, for Christ’s sake. There was no way he was standing here in my room saying shit like that. Maybe that Caviar Gold was stronger than I remembered and I’d passed out or was hallucinating.

“Daire?” Gavin squeezed around me. “I know I’ve been bad the last couple of days, teasing you and getting in your way…” He stood on his toes and put his lips by my ear. “But I just wanted you to look at me.”

I gritted my teeth even as my fingers balled into fists at my sides.

“You know, like, *really* look at me.”

I wasn’t sure how much more I could take of this. What was the normal amount of time someone could survive with blue balls? It wasn’t like I wanted to get hard for Gavin, or suddenly notice how plump his lower lip

was compared to the top. It wasn't as if I had invited him into my shower to watch me get off the other morning, and yet here I fucking was, caught up in this frustrating predicament where there was no good outcome.

I'd tried to push him away. Tried to be an ass. Tonight I'd even had his date's car towed to the local precinct, and *still* Gavin was climbing all over me.

There was only so much a man could do, and honestly, that was more than anyone could expect from me. So would it be so bad if—

"What if I just unbutton your jeans?" Gavin said, batting his lashes as he stared up at me like some innocent creature.

Yeah, an innocent creature whose hand was now— "Fuckin' *hell*"—inside my jeans and wrapping around my aching dick.

"You're naked under here…" Gavin's raspy voice matched the arousal turning his eyes a darker shade of grey, and I knew I was in a whole world of trouble. "That's so damn hot. Do you always"—he squeezed and gave me a rough pull—"go bare like this?"

Like I was going to answer that. Like I *could*. It was hard enough to stand still and upright while he was milking my cock. To actually string a sentence together would require more brain cells than I figured I had right then.

Gavin nipped his way up my jaw, nuzzling the stubble on my cheek as he swiped his thumb over the head of my dick.

"I want to taste you so bad, but I don't want to stop touching you. Hmm, maybe I should just get down on my knees and—"

"Stop." That was it. I was done. I gave him a gentle shove back, and Gavin blinked up at me. "You should go."

"Go?"

"Yes. Go. To your own room. You do have one of those."

Gavin's eyes narrowed, then fell to my open jeans and stiff dick that rejected every single one of my words. "Are you serious right now?"

"Don't I look serious?"

"You look hard as a rock and stubborn as…as an *ass*." Gavin took a step back, running a hand through his hair. "Why do you keep doing this to me? Why do you keep saying no when you clearly want to say yes? Tell me."

I wasn't going to get into all the reasons this was wrong. Especially when there was a whole goddamn list—at the top of which was his brother, my friend, if I could call the other guys that. But I wasn't in my right mind,

and there was little to no blood left in my head to help with my reasoning skills.

So the only thing I was going to tell Gavin right now was, “Go to your room.” In the hopes that—

“You’re unbelievable.”

—he’d turn around and walk the fuck out of mine.

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# TWENTY-THREE

## *daire*

MY WORDS HAD done their job. Gavin had fucked off for the night and left me alone, but my room no longer felt like a refuge. All of a sudden the music was too loud, too grating, and the night breeze blowing in from the open window too damn chilly.

Probably didn't help that my dick was out, hard, and frustrated as hell.

With a curse, I stuffed it back inside my jeans, ignoring the ache that could've been easily rectified with Gavin's mouth. I couldn't stop the picture my mind conjured of him on his knees, deep-throating my cock the way he obviously wanted to. Those full lips would be even more swollen as they wrapped around me. I imagined the way his eyes would water as he took me so far into his mouth that he choked and still begged for more.

Fuck, that picture was sweet. It almost had me turning my stubborn ass around and giving in to temptation, but something held me back. As I slammed my door shut and then crossed the room to close the window, it occurred to me what the hell that was.

Donovan.

I didn't claim to be a good guy or even decent, but I wasn't fucked up enough to go behind Donovan's back and mess with his brother. Even with the whole host of reasons why Gavin should've been off-limits, that was the one line I wouldn't cross.

Or so I thought.

Because as I lay in bed that night, wide awake and refusing to get myself off out of sheer spite, I wasn't even sure that was something that would hold me back much longer. With every hour that passed, more of my

thinly held resolve crumbled, to the point that had Gavin slipped inside my room then, I'd be on him, inside him, faster than he could blink.

This was bullshit.

But I stayed put, hands clenched in my sheets and the minutes slowly crawling by. When my alarm went off, the exhaustion I expected to feel after not sleeping was nowhere to be found. Instead, it felt like someone had shot my ass with adrenaline. Clarity—or maybe it was no longer giving any more fucks—had struck sometime during the early-morning hours, and I was done avoiding the obvious.

Gavin had been right. I'd been saying no to him and denying what I wanted—fucking *needed* now—and that wasn't me. I didn't deprive myself. Not of anything. And I sure didn't go to bed with my dick so hard it could pound through steel.

I wanted to make a mess of him. I wanted his body hot, sweaty, and filthy against mine, and I wanted to put a stop to the teasing and make good on all those sexual promises he'd made.

Was it a terrible idea? Yes, but I no longer gave a shit. My mind was made up, and now all that existed was executing. Something Gavin had helped with without knowing when he left the apartment before I finished getting dressed.

*Yeah, run while you can,* I thought as I pulled a pair of jeans on over my bare ass.

He wouldn't be able to avoid me for long, but for his sake I'd let him get a bit of distance before I shut that shit down for good.

Impatience rode me hard as I finished getting ready, forgoing coffee and food in favor of something that would sate my hunger even better.

By the time I made my way downstairs and into the Sprinter, my restlessness was at an all-time high—so too with the rest of the guys, if the way they glared in my direction was any indication. All but Gavin, who was sitting in the back corner staring out the window and making it a point to ignore me entirely.

"The fuck are you all lookin' at?" I said, slamming the door shut behind me.

I'd be lying if I said paranoia didn't take over momentarily, but then West spoke up and put that shit to rest.

"For someone who doesn't make an effort with his appearance, you sure as hell take a long-ass time getting down here. What do you do, iron your

underwear?”

“Not wearing any,” I snapped, planting my ass in an open seat.

“Really?” Travis asked, while beside him, West groaned.

“I didn’t need to know that.”

I shrugged. “You asked.”

“Something I’m regretting. No one needs that visual.”

Movement out of the corner of my eye caught my attention, and I saw Gavin shifting in his seat. He looked up, his eyes meeting mine, and it was clear by the intensity flaring there that West’s words didn’t apply to everyone. Gavin knew, and still wanted, what I packed inside these jeans.

“Doesn’t it chafe?” Travis asked, still stuck on my current lack of briefs. “I mean, I’ve done it with leather and chaps, but jeans don’t seem like the good kind of friction.”

“Oh my God.” Preston scrubbed a hand over his face. “It’s too early for this. I don’t need to know what underwear you’re wearing. Or not wearing.”

“That’s because you have no style and don’t wanna show yours off. Let me guess…” Donovan tapped his lips as a lock of blond hair fell across his forehead. “Boring blue cotton boxer briefs. Am I right?”

Preston’s mouth parted in surprise before he recovered. “They’re not boring. Archer likes them.”

“That’s because he’s old,” East said, smirking. “And old people choose comfort over style. Guess that explains how you found each other.”

Preston rolled his eyes. “You’re such an ass. What do *you* wear? Solid gold?”

East smoothed a hand down his pressed pants and picked off an imaginary piece of lint. “Only the most luxurious cashmere will do for my perfect ass.”

“I bet I can guess which ones,” Donovan said. “A hundred bucks says they’re Nice Laundry. The gold-embroidered ones.”

“Actual gold? I was right?” Preston’s incredulous tone said it all.

Donovan cocked a brow and motioned for East to answer. “Go ahead. Tell me I’m wrong.”

“You’re in the fashion industry.” East crossed his ankle over his knee and lifted a shoulder. “That’s hardly fair.”

“A bet’s a bet.”

“One I didn’t agree to.”

“Because I’m right? Prove it. I’m down for a little show-and-tell.”

East gestured for him to have the floor. “Then by all means. Show us.”

Donovan stood up, and Gavin groaned, his stare moving back to the window as his brother unzipped his pants. There wasn’t an ounce of shyness in his body, but how could there be when we’d unknowingly watched him get it on in a porn scene?

A pair of velvet-trimmed teal boxers came into view, with the brand’s logo in large letters across the top. “From my latest campaign. Can’t even buy these yet.”

East leaned forward, squinted, and then looked up at Donovan. “It looked bigger on your billboard.”

Donovan zipped up his pants. “Jealous? Careful, green doesn’t really go with your skin tone.”

“Everything goes with me,” East said, waving his hand in the air. “Gavin, your turn. Want to show us how you compare to big brother?”

An irrational wave of anger came over me, and I narrowed my gaze on East. “Shut. The fuck. Up.”

East’s brows shot high, and those wicked eyes gleamed. “Did I hit a sore spot? Interesting…”

But I no longer gave a shit about East or the curious looks from everyone else as I looked back at Gavin. His brows were pulled together slightly as he watched me, like he wasn’t sure what to make of what I’d just said. Not after kicking him out of my room last night. I’d been pushing and pulling for so long he probably had whiplash, but I wasn’t about to sit here and watch Gavin drop his pants for anyone but me.

The longer I held his stare, the louder the blood rushed in my ears, blocking everyone out until it was just the two of us. The shift in his expression happened quickly—he was frowning one second and biting down on his pillowy bottom lip the next. Even clear across the van, I could feel the desire radiating off him, and it matched the insistent throbbing of my cock.

Fuck, I wanted him. This was happening, but I’d be damned if it was with all of these assholes watching.

The door opened suddenly, Scotty moving aside so we could all pile out. I hadn’t even realized we’d arrived, but thank God for the timing, because I wasn’t sure how much longer I could hold off.

One by one, all the guys exited the Sprinter, but I kept my ass planted right where it was. Breathing wasn't coming easy, not because of what I was about to do, but because Gavin was walking up the aisle with his fitted pants tenting at the hips, not even bothering to hide it. He gave a knowing look and inclined his head for me to follow him out.

But if he thought I was going to fuck him for the first time in a bathroom at Astor, he had another thing coming.

When Donovan walked by, I curled my finger into the waist of his pants and tugged him back, holding him out of the way so the last of the guys could exit.

"What the…?" Donovan glanced over his shoulder.

I let go. "Shut the door."

"What? Why?"

Impatience overrode any pretense of pleasantries. "Just do it."

He looked at me like I'd lost my mind, but he reached for the handle anyway. "One sec," he told the guys, before shutting the two of us inside.

Planting his hands on his hips, he turned around and raised a brow. "What's going on?"

"Sit down."

Something in my tone must've finally gotten through, because he didn't put up a fight as he took the seat across from me. "Is everything okay?"

"No," I said, because everything wasn't okay. My entire world had been flipped upside down, and it was his brother's fault.

"No? Shit. What do you need?"

"Van talk."

That clearly hadn't been what he was expecting, because surprise lit his eyes. "Hold on. *You* want a Van talk?"

"I didn't say want, I said need."

"Uh. Okay," he said slowly, as if trying to grasp it. All the guys came to him for a "Van talk" at some point when they wanted levelheaded advice, so why would I be any different?

Not that I needed advice from him at this point, but I *did* need the privacy.

"So what is it you…need?" he asked.

"To fuck your brother."

If it hadn't been for how I could see the pulse in the side of Donovan's neck, I would've thought time stood still. Everything went silent and froze

in that moment.

“I’m sorry, what did you just say?” he croaked.

“I said I’m going to fuck your brother.”

Donovan blinked and then fell back in his seat. “That’s what I thought you said.”

I hadn’t seen Donovan at a loss for words often, but it was clear he was struggling now as the silence stretched between us. He rubbed absently at his forehead while I struggled to keep my dick in check.

“Um. Why are you telling me this?” he said, finally meeting my eyes again. “Are you…asking permission or something?”

“No.”

“Well, what if I say no?”

I shrugged. “Too bad.”

“What if Gavin says no?”

“He won’t.”

Donovan’s eyes widened to the point of popping out, and I could see all the questions running through his mind.

“So something is going on between you two, is that it?”

“Not yet.”

He cursed, shaking his head. “So what the hell is this then? This Van talk?”

“A heads-up.” I knew what I wanted, but I wasn’t going to go behind Donovan’s back to get it. I wasn’t asking for his permission. A heads-up I could do.

I stood up, adjusted my insistent hard-on, and yanked the door open to see the guys all still standing there with bewildered looks on their mugs.

“What the hell was that about?” Travis asked as Donovan stumbled out of the Sprinter like he was in a daze.

I kicked my chin up at Donovan. “Good talk.”

“*You* had a Van talk?” West said, then turned to Donovan. “What about?”

“I…don’t even have the words.” Donovan rubbed at his eyes, like he could erase the last five minutes by doing so, but he wasn’t the one I was paying attention to anymore.

With pure need pounding my veins, I searched out a pair of grey eyes, then I pointed and said, “You. Get the fuck inside.”

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# TWENTY-FOUR

## *gavin*

THE WHOOSH OF the van door as it slid closed behind me was barely audible over the thunderous beat of my heart. It'd been pounding uncontrollably from the second Daire had demanded an impromptu "Van talk" with my brother. And as I climbed inside and spotted him sprawled out in a back seat, it showed no signs of slowing.

*Breathe…* I told myself as I stared at the indecent picture he made with his denim-clad legs spread wide and his hand between them, massaging one impressive hard-on. A hard-on, he'd all but told the world, that was for *me*.

Was that why he'd stopped me last night? Because he felt some misguided obligation to tell Donovan what we were about to do? That should infuriate me, and likely would when I thought about it later. But right now all I could think about was the look in Daire's eyes as they trailed over me.

A look that bordered on savage.

"Shut the partition."

My dick jerked at the demand, apparently liking the heavy-handed way Daire was barking orders at it. I pressed a button on one of the control panels, and a tinted, soundproof partition separated Scotty from any passengers in the vehicle.

A special feature we'd all chipped in for in case a situation like this should…arise.

Daire's dark hair fell over his eyes as the heavy-duty panel slid into place, then he reached for the button of his jeans and flicked it open.

My hungry gaze locked on his hands as he parted the denim, my impatience something tangible for the first time in my entire life, as he slowly reached inside his jeans. I stood silently, watching with intense focus, as he finally freed his rock-hard cock and offered it up to me like a gift.

"You were right." Daire's voice was gruff as he gave himself a long, slow pull. "My dick is in lust with you."

Thank God, because I was in lust with it. Something that was obvious from my own erection throbbing behind the zipper of my pants.

I took in the wide, wet head of Daire's cock peeking out the top of his tight fist, the thick, long shaft he stroked as I licked my lips, imagining how he'd taste, and finally, I memorized the veins pulsing along his length and wondered if I'd be able to trace them all with my tongue without lifting my lips from his skin.

"Fuckin' hell, Gavin. You want me to come inside you or my fist?"

*Holy shit.* There it was. The confirmation that we were finally going to do this. I hadn't been sure if he was going to let me just suck him or go all the way. Yeah, I was *so* here for this, and I'd be damned if he didn't finish inside of me.

"I thought the choice was me or my mouth?" I said.

I was about to walk toward him when the van lurched forward, Scotty choosing that exact moment to pull into traffic, and I pitched forward up the aisle. I reached out, looking for something to grab on to—and as luck would have it, Daire's muscular thighs were the perfect height to help break my fall.

I grabbed him as my knees hit the floor directly between his legs, and as the van slowed down, I found myself face to face with Daire's naked cock.

He tightened his hand around his rigid length as he angled it toward me, and I drew in a gasp of air.

A sardonic smile crooked the corner of his lips. "Since you're down there, your mouth seems like a good place to start."

His words were like music to my ears and what I'd been waiting to hear all week—*dying* to hear.

"Unless you don't want to."

Daire let go of himself, but I quickly reached out to take his place, curling my fingers around him. A curse ripped through the van at the skin-to-skin contact between us, and I looked up at him from beneath my lashes.

“Oh, I want to,” I said.

“Then what are you waiting for?”

Daire stared down at me, his eyes dark as night, as I flicked my tongue over the head of his cock. The taste of his pre-cum sent flames licking over my body, heating me from the inside out.

How many times had I imagined this? How many times had I lain in bed at night, fantasizing about getting my mouth on him? Around him? So I could drive him crazy. And now, it was happening.

I tightened my grip and bent my head, parting my lips to take him inside, and the next thing I knew, Daire was threading his fingers through my hair. I closed my eyes at the exquisite feel of his hands twisting around the longer strands. When he jutted his hips up and applied a slight pressure, I relaxed my throat and swallowed him all the way to the back.

“Jesus Christ.”

As far as I knew Daire wasn’t exactly the churchgoing type—unless it was the club—so to know that I was giving him some sort of religious experience made me feel damn good about myself.

Also…powerful.

As I drew my lips up him, I smoothed my other hand up his thigh, kneading the tense muscles as they flexed and shifted so he could piston his hips up to chase my retreating mouth.

I hummed, reveling in my dominance over him in that moment, until those fingers in my hair tugged me closer and directed my mouth back over his cock.

“Fuckin’ tease.” Daire shoved deeper inside, and his pre-cum painted a salty line down the center of my tongue. “You get off on torturing me, don’t you?”

Maybe I had a little, but I was getting off on this a lot more.

I lifted my gaze to his, letting him see the delirious haze of arousal I was experiencing—and the next thing I knew, the hand in my hair was yanking my mouth free of him and he was cradling my face, stroking a thumb over my swollen lips.

“Turn around and face the other seat.”

I glanced over my shoulder to see the chair behind me had been turned to face the person in the back.

“Stay on your knees, Gavin.” Daire shifted forward on his seat until he was bent at the waist and his mouth was hovering over mine. “Turn around

and bend over the seat."

"I don't—"

"You're gonna need something to hang on to if I'm gonna fuck you on our way back to school."

If it had been six months ago, I would've tucked tail and run at the ferocity of Daire's words. But as of a week ago, all I'd wanted to do was experience the potency behind them. The intense hunger I could feel vibrating in him whenever I was near.

I'd never had anyone be so physically affected by me before. Joey had been attentive but not…hungry. He'd been possessive of me like one would a shiny penny. But Daire's possession was primal, instinctive, like an animal who would fight for its mate to the bitter end.

I turned to face the seat behind me, swaying slightly as Scotty weaved in and out of traffic. Once I was steady, I reached for the button of my pants and popped it open. Then I hooked my thumbs in the waist and drew it, and my tight briefs, down over my hips.

A feral sound echoed through the van, wrapping itself around me like someone's arms. Most would've run from a sound that fierce, but it only served to excite me.

Daire liked what he was looking at. So I decided to give him an even better view, shoving my tightfitting pants down to my knees and bending over until my cheek was on the cushion, just as he'd told me.

"Damn, but you're fuckin' pretty."

I didn't need to turn around to know Daire was moving closer. It was as though every nerve ending in my body was hard-wired to his.

"You have the smoothest ass I've ever seen." Daire swept his palm over the curve of my behind, his fingers flirting with the crack, making me squirm. "Pale, soft, and smooth. Like ice cream."

Oh yeah, Daire definitely sounded hungry, so I decided to tempt him to indulge in what I was offering.

"Why don't you have a taste?"

"Because I might not ever stop." His fingers dug a little harder into my hips. "And I need to," he muttered. "But not yet."

His words were soft, as though he was talking to himself, and that became abundantly clear when his large hands moved to cover my ass cheeks and spread them wide.

"Not until I get in here…"

I shivered at his intention, the cool air in the van hitting my exposed skin and making my hole clench under the scrutiny. The groan that filled the silence was full of frustration as Daire pressed his thumb to the most vulnerable part of my body.

“I don’t wanna hurt you—”

“You won’t.” The two words were out of mouth before he could finish his thought.

“I will. But it’s too late now.” He dragged his thumb down between my legs until he was cradling my balls. “You’re mine.”

The warm heat of his tongue flicked across my tailbone, making me flinch under the unexpected touch. The low rumble of laughter as he kissed his way up my spine was about the sexiest thing I’d ever heard.

It was full of arrogance, confidence, and a hint of snark. I’d never be able to unhear it, and I knew for damn sure I’d be dreaming about it. Just like I’d be dreaming about the way his jeans were brushing against my bare thighs as he shifted in behind me.

“Daire…” I panted. The anticipation he was building was way more than I’d expected from the man who ordered me into the van with a scowl. I’d figured my pants would be ripped and my body left used and abused for days.

My pants were safe for now, but the jury was still out on the last one.

“In a rush?” Daire said. “Should’ve known with the way you’ve been rubbing your dick all over me at every opportunity…”

“Tell me you didn’t like it.”

Daire let go of my balls to grip my ass again, spreading me wide. “Wouldn’t be here if I didn’t.”

The warm, wet feel of saliva slicking up my hole sent a shiver racing up my spine as Daire gripped my cheeks a little harder.

“I wouldn’t be about to destroy you.”

*Destroy me, please,* I wanted to beg, but I also didn’t want to show my entire hand.

Daire already knew I wanted him. He knew I was desperate for what he was about to give me—I’d made that more than obvious. The last thing I needed to do was add begging to the list.

He spat a couple more times along the narrow strip of my ass, lubing me up as much as possible under the circumstances, then I heard the distinct

sound of a packet being torn open, and seconds later his thick length was sliding between my ass cheeks.

The wide head of his cock nudged up against my entrance, and while I was tight, I was ready for the burn that he was about to deliver. I wanted it. Craved it. When he finally pushed past the first ring of muscle, my fingers dug into the leather of the seat and a moan was ripped out of my throat.

Daire grunted, the only sign that he was experiencing something he was enjoying, as he continued to drive into me one inch at a time, until he bottomed out and stilled.

Holy hell he felt amazing, stretching me wide and claiming me in a way I knew I'd never escape. I could hear his heavy breathing matching mine as I turned my head and looked up at the fogged window of the van.

There was something so incredibly hot about knowing that, just outside that pane of glass, people were passing by. Some were sitting at stoplights as Daire's fingers tightened on my hips and he pulled his hard dick from my body. Some might even be looking at that steamy window wondering what was happening inside as he shoved back into me with enough force that I slid up the leather and my head hit the back of the seat.

But none of them would know for sure.

This moment was mine and his alone. One I'd keep close with me all day and well into the nights that followed.

"Goddamn," Daire said between clenched teeth as I struggled to get some sort of hold of the seat, and when he pulled out of me this time, I was right there bracing my hands and shoving back onto him.

"Fuck yeahhh…" he praised, as I started to use the seat as leverage to ride his cock.

"Just like that," I panted, wrapping a hand around my erection and squeezing. "I need you to keep—"

"Fuckin' you hard?" Daire curled down over me and put his lips by my ear. "Yeah, I got it."

He nipped at my lobe, and my entire body quaked, a hair trigger away from total destruction.

"Take what you need," he growled. "Use me."

I turned my head, wanting to capture Daire's mouth, but before I could he was back behind me, up on his knees, gripping my hips and ready to ride.

"'Cause I plan to use the hell out of you."

Daire kneaded the tender skin of my hips as he drew out of my body, and my ass clung to his thick shaft like it didn't want it to leave. The intrusion of him was as intense and all-consuming as I'd ever imagined as he began to drive his hips forward, penetrating me in a way that propelled me up the seat on every solid thrust.

"Ah, ah, *ahhh…*" I moaned. "Don't stop. More, Daire. *More.…*"

His hands, body, and cock dominated every movement now, and I reveled in being his supplicant. I'd thought it would make me lesser, that it would somehow take away the one last bit of power I had in teasing and torturing him. But judging by the frantic way he picked up the pace, it had done the exact opposite.

My begging had him eager to give, and his relentless prods to my prostate had my toes curling in my shoes.

"You better fuckin' hurry," Daire said, his voice strained, his breathing heavy. "Astor's just around the corner."

Oh *God*. I wasn't sure if he was trying to warn me or turn me on more. But the idea that we were about to arrive at the front gates of the prestigious university where all our friends were currently roaming the halls—with him inside me, and me about to come all over the Sprinter's floor—had me shoving upright off the seat and taking him as deep as I could get him.

A loud shout left Daire, and one of his arms wrapped around my shoulders and neck, keeping me in place, while he wound the other around my waist and took hold of my dick.

He fucked me hard and fast then, quick, deep jabs, as he worked my cock. My body no longer belonged to me in any way, shape, or form. I let myself go.

Our curses echoed off the van's walls as it inched closer and closer to our final destination, and just as Scotty pulled into the drop-off zone, a car sped up in front of him, cutting him off, and he slammed on the brakes, jerking both Daire and I backward.

That didn't slow us down, though. In fact, the new position had Daire exactly where I needed him to finish this. The van came to a stop outside, and Daire continued to hammer inside me like a man out of control.

I turned my face into his arm, knowing I was about to scream bloody murder. The orgasm tingling at the base of my spine was only one more thrust away from shooting out of me and all over the floor.

Daire trembled against me, milking my pounding shaft as I clenched my ass around the bold intruder. His arms tightened around me, his body shuddering with every pulse of his dick, and my only regret was that I couldn’t feel the hot flood of his cum filling me, nor would I feel it dripping out of me later.

I guess I would just have to rely on memory, and the delicious ache I would feel as soon as the high wore off, because holy shit, I’d just had sex with Daire.

Daire had just had sex with me.

And now we had to go to class.

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# TWENTY-FIVE

## *daire*

I AIMED FOR the bull's-eye and threw another dart, but this one landed so far off center it bounced off the board and fell to the floor.

Great. I was playing shit tonight. It wouldn't have anything to do with the fact that I'd broken all my rules and fucked Gavin this morning.

I threw another. Missed.

Nope. Nothing at all to do with him.

"Another couple of tequila shots for you." The lone waitress manning the residents-only bar at the Towers set the full glasses on the high-top beside me and winked. "It's on the house. You look like you need them."

Thanking her with a nod, I tossed back one of the shots and picked up another dart. This time I actually made it onto the board, but just barely.

Maybe I needed to keep drinking. It sure as shit wasn't making my aim any worse.

As I grabbed up the darts and took my place again, my eyes caught on Gavin making his way into the Towers, his school bag slung over his shoulder. It was late, and the fact that I knew where he'd been—hell, knew his schedule—was pathetic. I paid far too much attention to where he was every minute of the day. Even now, when I hadn't been looking for him, there he was.

I watched as he waved to the front desk attendants and made his way to the elevators, but before he stepped inside, he happened to look in my direction.

The way his face instantly brightened when he saw me had an unfamiliar tightening in my chest. He shouldn't be looking at me that way. I

didn’t deserve it. I wasn’t sure anyone did.

Turning away, I refocused on the board and let another dart fly. It landed —just into the wall.

Gavin chuckled behind me. “Having an off night?”

Jerking the dart out of the plaster, I shook my head. “How can you tell?”

“You’re usually so good at this.” He set his bag on one of the chairs and leaned on the high-top as I took my place again. “Something got you… distracted?”

I hesitated, but somehow that was what did the trick, because the dart hit the bull’s-eye.

“Oh shit, look at that.” Gavin grinned as he walked my way, casually reaching for the waist of my jeans as he looked up at me with adoring eyes. “Looks like I’m your good-luck charm.”

Of course that was what he was thinking, when he really should know better. Nothing about me was good. For anyone. He needed to save that look for someone else.

I stepped back out of his hold and focused on the board. “Did you want something?”

“Yeah, I thought maybe we could go out for dinner if you haven’t eaten yet? I’m starving.”

“With the guys?”

“Um. No, I was thinking just you and me. Us. Together. You know, without…the others.”

Christ. He wanted a *date*. I should’ve expected it after this morning, but I thought he understood that wasn’t my thing.

Gavin was all about long walks on the beach, holding hands, and candlelit dinners. Me? I just wanted to set fire to everything and be done with it. Let the flame catch, burn hot, then get out before it burned you to a fuckin’ crisp.

“D?”

“Yeah?”

“Have you eaten?”

Damn it, why wouldn’t he just leave me alone? I didn’t want to be an ass, but he wasn’t leaving me much of an option. “Nah, not hungry.”

The flash of hurt that crossed Gavin’s face had me refocusing on the board again. This was the exact reason I’d steered clear of him today. The reason I’d done everything I could to avoid hooking up with him in the first

place. He was too sweet, too naïve. Hell, I'd flat-out told him I'd hurt him. But here he was, trying to make this more than it was. Trying to attach feelings to the physical.

I didn't play that way, though. I wasn't about to pretend what happened this morning was more than a quick fuck. That would be worse in the long run for everyone. So it was best he got over this…crush, or whatever it was he was feeling.

If I hurt him today, he could hate me tomorrow. Then we'd all get over it and move the hell on.

"Oh, okay. Well, maybe I could just get us a couple more drinks? I wasn't really hungry anyway."

I stalked over to the board and pulled the dart free, then turned back to Gavin. "Why do you do that?"

A tentative smile curved Gavin's lips. "Do what?"

"Change your plans for someone else?"

"I didn't do that."

"Yeah, you did." I walked back over to the table and downed the other shot of tequila. "You wanted to go eat. So go eat."

Gavin opened his mouth as though he were going to say something, but then he stopped. "You're trying to piss me off."

God, it was annoying how well he knew me. But that didn't stop my dick from reacting to the way he called me out on my shit. I couldn't remember the last time someone had been ballsy enough to go toe to toe with me, yet there Gavin was at every turn, ready to butt heads with me.

"Why the hell would I do that?" I said.

"'Cause you're freaking out." He scoffed and shook his head. "I should've known better. You stuck your dick in me this morning, and when it jump-started your heart, you freaked the fuck out."

*Jesus*, I needed more alcohol for this. "Hate to break it to you, but my heart long since checked out. It would take a hell of a lot more than ten minutes in your sweet ass to bring it back to life."

Gavin snatched his bag off the table and glared at me. "What are you so afraid of?"

"I'm not—"

"All I wanted was dinner. Not a declaration of love. Not even a *date*. I just wanted to eat a damn meal, and you had to go and be an ass about it."

He wasn’t wrong, but it was better he hate me now and just get it out of his system.

“Then go *eat*. This is what I’m talking about. Someone says they don’t want to do something, and you immediately change to their plans. Stand up for yourself.”

I don’t know why I was pushing him so hard. He already hated my guts, judging by the furious look on his face. But I figured since I was all in already, I might as well go for gold. Being an asshole was, after all, the one thing I excelled at.

“Wow, okay, so that’s how you see me? As a pushover?”

That wasn’t how I saw him at all, especially with the way he stood up to me. But I wasn’t going to admit that. Not when I was doing everything in my power to make him stop looking at me with eyes full of fire and arousal. His anger barely masked the fact that he would immediately jump into bed with me if I dragged him upstairs right now.

“Your words, not mine.”

“Unbelievable. So this morning, that meant nothing to you?”

“I mean, it was good.” I shrugged, needing him to get the hell away from me before I did something seriously stupid. “You’re a good fuck.”

Gavin’s palm came up and landed hard on my cheek before I could duck out of the way. The loud cracking sound was the complete opposite to the sounds I’d wrung from him this morning, but no less deserving, as a look of shock crossed his face.

“Oh my God,” he muttered, snatching his hand back. “I… I hit you.”

I worked my jaw, rubbing my hand over the hot mark his palm had left on my cheek. “I probably deserved it.”

“You definitely deserved it.”

My lips twitched at his fiery comeback, and Gavin took a step back.

“I don’t know why you feel like you can’t let anyone in. Why you can’t let anyone close. All I wanted was dinner.”

“No, you didn’t.” I let out a sigh and ran a hand through my hair, turning back to the dartboard.

“So that’s it?”

I glanced over my shoulder to see Gavin clutching his bag to his chest, his wide eyes pleading with me to change my mind. But it wasn’t going to happen. I was all wrong for him—couldn’t he see that? He’d just slapped

me across the face, for fuck's sake. Why in the hell would he want anything more to do with me?

"Unless you want to go another round upstairs? Or in the restrooms here? The stalls are big enough for a fu—"

"Yeah, no." Gavin licked at his lips, swallowing down the disgust he no doubt felt at knowing he'd let someone like me touch him. "I'm good."

I bet he was. He was finally realizing what I'd done just now was best for both of us. Once was a mistake; twice was a habit. So if he could just turn around and walk away, we could chalk this up to a hot mistake, and leave it at that.

"I'm going to head upstairs."

I gave a clipped nod and turned back to the dartboard, and as I heard his footsteps fade into the distance, I stared at the bull's-eye, pictured *my* fucked-up face, and let the dart fly—and what do you know, I hit that bastard dead center.

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# TWENTY-SIX

## *gavin*

THE OBNOXIOUS SOUND of wolf whistles and hollering assaulted my ears the next morning as I trudged out the front door of the Towers, trailing Daire, who for once in his life had decided to be on time.

If it'd been up to me, I would've been climbing into the site of my biggest mistake on my own. As it was, I was making the walk of shame with the ass that had ruined this small luxury we had. Now, instead of enjoying a Sprinter ride across town, I would forever regret the moment I'd lost all my brain cells and let Daire fuck me in it.

Ugh. I was so stupid to think that I'd somehow managed to crack through the tough exterior that Daire presented to the world because I'd let him inside of me. I thought we'd shared a moment yesterday, that we'd finally gotten past the surly grunts and silent scowls. But as we approached the group of morons gathered outside the Sprinter, it was crystal clear that the scowl was here to stay.

"Would you look at that? Daire is on time." West chuckled. "Guess he just needed incentive to get *up* in the morning."

Oh God, this was worse than I'd thought. Sooo much worse. I'd figured the guys would give us shit for hooking up after Donovan finally told them what went down. But after Daire's blunt dismissal of me last night, this ribbing stung all the more.

The only saving grace? Donovan wasn't here. He had an early photoshoot in Brooklyn, and I'd never been more thankful in my life.

"Maybe he just needed to clear his…*head*." Travis snorted at his stupid joke. "You know, blow his load? Clear the pipes? So he could remember

how to use his brain and tell the time."

"That why yours isn't workin'?" Daire fired back. "Little hard up over there?"

"Ain't nothing little about it. And why are you so touchy? I figured you be scaring us all by smiling this morning."

"Fuck off." Daire shoved past him and climbed into the Sprinter, leaving the rest of the guys staring after him, slack-jawed.

*Great. Way to keep our private shit private, Daire.*

It'd been bad enough when he practically announced what we were going to do yesterday. But now he was storming around like he'd stuck his dick in a beehive, and that beehive was me.

One by one the guys turned their attention back to me, confusion clouding their expressions.

"What crawled up his ass?" East said. "Because I know it wasn't you."

"How do you know that?" Preston said.

"Seriously? You think *Gavin's* going to top Daire? Wow, you really have been in the closet a long time."

"I mean, it's possible," Travis mused. "I could see Daire liking that burn and pain. Kind of matches his temperament."

"Maybe, but—" West scrunched his nose up at Travis, all of them ignoring the fact that I was standing right there. "I don't think Gavin has it in him."

"Hey. Guys?" I finally said, and all four heads turned my way. "Can we maybe *not* talk about my sex life out here on the street?"

"Sure." West nodded and hooked a thumb over his shoulder. "But before we go in there and talk about it, you did get the Sprinter detailed, right?"

"Oh for fuck's sake." I stomped past them, ignoring the snickers as I climbed inside. Daire was in the back seat sprawled out in the same spot he'd been in yesterday.

He leveled me with a stare that screamed: *What?* And it took everything I had not to march down the aisle and slap him again.

I got it. He didn't want to date. Not that that was what I'd asked for last night. I just asked if he wanted to go to dinner, not go steady. He was acting like I'd wanted him to wear my class ring.

He didn't have to act like such a grumpy bastard. But then again, was this really any different to the way Daire usually acted?

I planted my ass in the seat directly behind the driver, and farthest from Daire. But as the rest of the guys piled in, the tension in the air increased.

“I’m confused,” Preston said, eyes darting between me and Daire. “You both seemed fine yesterday.”

“Fine?” West snorted. “They were so high off orgasms I’m surprised their heads didn’t float off.”

“Can you please just shut up,” I muttered, wishing I’d taken a sick day.

How was it possible to feel so incredible one minute and so low the next? I thought the rollercoaster would end once Daire finally gave in, but it was even worse between us now.

I was such an idiot. West was right—I’d been off in the clouds with a huge, satisfied grin on my face from the second I stepped out of the Sprinter, so I couldn’t exactly blame them for wanting to know what had changed so fast. *My* head was still spinning.

“Ooh, Daire. You better be glad Donovan’s not here to see how you fucked over his baby brother.” Travis tsked. “I’d hate to be in your shoes when he sics his huge boyfriend on you.”

Yeah, right. After watching the beat-down Daire gave all those guys at the fight club, I doubted Kelly would be able to get even a hit on him, no matter how big his biceps were.

Not that I wanted a fight. I just wanted to know why Daire kept running off every time I tried to get close.

“Can’t you at least give us *some* of the dirty details?” Travis complained, and when Daire answered with a growl, he turned his attention to me. “Gavin, come on. How did it even happen? Was it the first time? A quickie or was there foreplay? Where exactly did you get it on in here—”

“And why are you back to not talking this morning?” Preston added.

“Guys, guys.” East tugged at the sleeves of his blazer. “Isn’t it obvious? Daire’s scowl scared Gavin’s dick.”

“What the fuck,” Daire said, as I turned around to pin East with a scowl of my own.

East grinned, clearly enjoying kicking up dirt. “Aww, did little Gavin not want to come out to play? Can’t say I blame you there. No telling where he’s been.”

“Why don’t you shut the hell up and go make a few mistakes of your own so we can rub it in your face,” I said.

“Oh shit.” West’s eyes widened.

Travis shook his head and looked back at Daire. “He called you a mistake. The fuck did you do?”

I didn’t look away nearly quick enough, because Daire caught my eyes, and I felt the same stab of pain from last night twist in my gut.

I also remembered his rough kisses along my spine and the way it felt to be taken by him so completely that I was still aching from it today. It would’ve been a good ache, too, if he hadn’t been such an ass afterward. I should’ve known better. I shouldn’t have gone after yet another guy who was no good for me.

So when Daire turned away to stare out the window, muttering, “Nothing important happened,” it was entirely on brand.

Didn’t mean it didn’t suck to hear. He couldn’t even give me a full twelve hours to enjoy finally getting my way before going and ruining it.

Yeah. I’d definitely be slapping him again at some point today.

“I get it,” Travis said, leaning over the back of my seat to invade my space. “I always think I can change them too.”

“You wouldn’t have to change them if you’d stop going after the straight ones,” East said as he typed on his phone.

Travis shrugged. “What can I say? They love me. And I like a challenge.”

I looked up at his grinning face and kept my voice low. “This isn’t exactly the same thing.”

“Really? I can’t think of anything more challenging than trying to make Daire come.”

“I heard that, fucker,” Daire said.

Sighing, I rubbed the back of my neck, feeling stiff in all the wrong places. Travis dropped his hand to my shoulder.

“Sorry, man,” he said quietly. “I could’ve warned you off that one.” He gave me a squeeze and sat back, leaving me in peace for the rest of the ride.

Like I would’ve heeded his warning, or anyone’s. I knew all about Daire’s red flags—knew them and had brushed them aside to run straight into danger anyway. Why? Because I believed he was more than his tough exterior. Because I saw those flashes of vulnerability that no one else seemed to. Because he always protected me in his own way, and surely, *surely* that meant something. That *I* meant something to him.

Whatever. I’d fucked around and found out, and now I was done. If he didn’t want me, then I was moving on and I’d find someone who did. Preferably someone who didn’t need therapy or underground fight clubs.

Maybe things would even go back to normal eventually, whatever that looked like. Daire could be just my roommate again, and I wouldn’t have to wonder how it would feel to be with him or dream about every possible way I could have him.

He’d stay the same way he’d always been, and I knew I would at least feel safe in his presence. At least physically.

And that would have to be enough.

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# TWENTY-SEVEN

## *daire*

I LOOKED LIKE shit.

There were dark shadows under my eyes from not having slept well all week, and my hair wasn't cooperating as I tried to smooth down a cowlick.

It was bullshit I even had to go spend my Friday night at Astor, but the dean had made it a requirement. Some new band was putting on a special performance, blah blah blah, it would be televised, blah blah, who gave a shit.

Giving up on my hair, I grabbed a black shirt from my closet and buttoned it up to my chest, leaving me a little room to breathe. The silver chain of the necklace I always wore glinted under the bathroom lights as I gave myself a once-over.

Still a shit-tastic view.

*Oh, who cares. I'm just gonna lurk in a corner anyway.*

I flicked off the light, grabbed my wallet and my phone, and headed out to the kitchen to fill up a flask. There was no way I'd get through one of these things sober, and Astor wouldn't be supplying the goods.

Opening a cabinet, I looked over my options and grabbed a thin leather flask that would fit easily in my pocket.

"Grab me one too."

Gavin's voice surprised the shit out of me, considering I hadn't heard him speak in days. We'd both gone into full avoidance mode again, which seemed to be our new normal.

I pulled another one down from the cabinet, setting them both on the kitchen island before grabbing a bottle of tequila off the bar. I hesitated on

another bottle, and before I picked it up I said, “Gin?”

“Yup.”

Yet another preference of Gavin’s I couldn’t help but know. I wished I wasn’t so damn tuned in to what he liked or didn’t like. It was all a bunch of useless knowledge that served no purpose whatsoever, besides driving me crazy.

I made the mistake of looking up when I slid the bottle of gin and the flask his way, and I swear my heart stopped for a beat. Gavin looked… pretty fucking incredible. Not that that was unusual, but he usually kept to blues and greys and neutrals. Tonight he’d busted out a vivid red jacket that, combined with his platinum hair, was stunning. There was no other word for it.

Gavin started to pour the gin into the flask but looked up when he felt me staring. “What?”

So defensive. I couldn’t blame him. I’d been an asshole, trying to get us over this awkward in between.

Gavin brushed the back of his hand over his jaw. “Is there something on my face?”

I shook my head, unable to stop from looking at the hot picture he made. But I couldn’t tell him that. He’d read into it, and that would only set us back a few steps.

With a nonchalance I didn’t feel, I said, “Red’s good,” and moved back to my side of the island to unscrew my poison.

He didn’t respond, but I felt him watching me as I filled my own flask and capped it tight. I’d be lying if I said the sexual tension between us had dissipated even with our being on shit terms. If anything, it was stronger now, so tangible I could cut it with a knife.

“Typical,” he muttered as he poured the liquor into his flask, and despite everything inside of me telling me to walk away, I did something I hadn’t done lately—I engaged.

“What did you say?”

Gavin looked up, as shocked as I was that I’d said shit. But hey, it looked I was stepping out of my comfort zone lately, didn’t it?

“Huh?”

“I asked what you said.”

Gavin screwed his nose up as he finished filling his flask and then screwed the cap on the gin bottle. “Why? It’s not like you care.”

“You’re right, but stop being passive-aggressive. You want to call me out on my shit, then call me out.”

“Okay.” Gavin planted his hands on the counter and glared at me. “I said *typical*. Typical, as in you throw out these little crumbs, these… moments of affection like treats for a well-trained animal. And then, like the dumbass *I* am, I immediately sit up at attention like, oh my God, he’s not the horrible asshat who stomped all over me last week. He really does care.” Gavin swiped up his flask, walking around the counter. “What kind of fucking idiot am I?”

He went to storm past me, but before he got even two steps away, I reached out and grabbed hold of his arm.

Gavin whirled around on me so fast that I immediately shifted back and dodged left, not wanting to feel the sting of his hand against my face again, even though I wouldn’t have blamed him.

“I told you I was no good for you,” I said, like that made every shitty thing I’d done this week better. “How long are you going to punish me for being right?”

“Punish you? I’m not punishing you.” He glanced down at the hand on my arm. “I’m forgetting you. Or at least *trying* to. Isn’t that what you wanted? No one to get close to you? No one to care about you? Well, wish granted. I’m moving on, and I’d appreciate it if you’d stop throwing your scraps under the table for me.”

He yanked his arm out of my hold and marched off down the hall to his side of the condo. I stared after him, my breathing difficult, as though I’d just taken a direct hit to the solar plexus.

I should just let it go. Let *him* go. Let him forget me, or whatever the fuck he was trying to do. That was what *I* wanted—what needed to happen. But instead, I found myself storming after him, not stopping until I was somewhere I’d never been—his bedroom.

“What do you mean you’re forgetting me?”

Gavin whirled around, a stunned expression stamped across his face. “Get out of my room.”

“No.”

“Daire. *Get out*.”

“No. You said something out there, and I want to know what you mean.” *Forget me?* How did he plan to do that? “Are you moving out?”

“What?” Gavin’s brow furrowed. “I didn’t say—”

“You said you were trying to forget me.” And every time I repeated it, my heart pounded a little faster. “What did you mean?”

Gavin scooped up his phone from the bed and shoved it into his pocket, then he stormed around the end of it until he was standing directly in front of me.

“I meant that I’m bringing a *date* tonight. That I’m forgetting that you and I… That we… It’s none of your business. Now get out of my way.”

“You’re bringing a date?” The words were out of my mouth before I could bite them back, and Gavin shook his head.

“I’m not doing this. Move.”

“Are you bringing a date?”

“Daire.” Gavin balled his hands at his sides, vibrating with fury. “*Move*.”

Seeing I wasn’t getting anywhere, I reluctantly moved out of his way. But as he left his room, I followed.

“Who is it?”

“Oh my God.” Gavin grabbed his key card and wallet off the entry table, and I kept pace with him, determined to find out who his *second* choice was for tonight.

What? No. I’d never been a fucking choice, but I sure as hell wanted to know who he’d called up to—

“It’s Trevor, okay?” Gavin swiped his key card.

Trevor the *Tool*? He had to be joking.

“The same guy who cares more about his car than you?” I snorted. “Yeah, good choice.”

“He’s better than you.” The elevator door swished open, and he stepped inside, gluing himself to one side of the car. “At least he called me the next day to apologize for being a self-centered dick. You just went out of your way to prove you *were* one.”

I had nothing to say to that. He was right. “He’s not good enough for you.”

“He’s not? Fine. Then you date me.”

I gripped the back of my neck in frustration. “I’m not good enough for you either.”

Gavin stared at me for a long moment, then shook his head. “Then you know what, Daire? You don’t get a say. You can’t have it both ways. You

can’t push me away and want nothing to do with me but then say no one else can be with me either. That’s not fair.”

“Like I give a shit what’s fair. You think I’m gonna sit back and watch you get taken advantage of? Again?”

“Jesus.” Gavin sighed, a defeated expression on his face. “Can we not do this? It’s exhausting.”

As the elevator doors opened, he stepped out with a heaviness to his shoulders, like he was weighted down.

I tried to bite my tongue, but it seemed like no matter what I said, it wouldn’t be what he wanted to hear.

“What do you suggest?” I found myself saying.

Gavin spun around to face me. “A truce. We both agree to move on and stop hating each other.”

Hate? That wasn’t what I felt for Gavin, but it was better than the alternative.

“I can’t promise I won’t say anything if your date goes all superdouche.”

“Can you maybe *try*? Can you manage that? For me?”

The pleading in Gavin’s eyes caught me like a snare, and I couldn’t seem to stop myself from nodding. Not exactly a full truce, but it was enough of an agreement that Gavin took his first full breath since he’d walked out of his room.

“Thank you,” he said, turning on his heel and walking out of the Towers to our ride, and I tried not to notice the way his lean body called to me. The way it had felt curled under mine.

I shook my head and reached for my flask in an effort to erase the memory that was still haunting me, but when I came up empty, I cursed.

I’d left the motherfucking thing upstairs.

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# TWENTY-EIGHT

## *gavin*

I ENDED UP meeting Trevor at Astor, and the limo dropped us off at the front, where he already stood waiting for me and looking a lot more relaxed than he had the last time I saw him.

"Damn," he said, grinning as he looked me up and down. "You look great. I feel underdressed."

"Not at all." He'd gone with ripped jeans, a plain white tee, and a bomber jacket, but it suited him. "I like the jacket."

"Yeah? Not too casual for the concert?"

I shook my head. "Nope. It's perfect."

"Awesome. You know I—" Trevor took a step back as Daire walked in between us without giving any fucks whatsoever. "Oh, hey, man. How's it goin'?"

Daire barely glanced his way before looking back at me with a "you can do better" look in his eyes. He kept right on walking, and Trevor's brows pulled together.

"Friendly guy, isn't he?" he said.

"The friendliest." If he knew Daire had been the one to get his precious ride towed, he wouldn't have anything good to say to him, much less hello. "I'm glad you got your car back."

Trevor blew out a breath. "Me too. You'd think I would've gotten an apology out of it, but no. I won't be going back to *that* restaurant again."

"I think that's probably a good idea."

The gates of Astor were open to the courtyard, news crews spread out on one side of the red carpet and photographers already shooting the

arriving guests in front of the step-and-repeat.

Trevor hesitated, and I just barely missed ramming into him at full speed.

“Something wrong?” I asked.

“Uh.” His gaze traveled from the red carpet to me and back again. “I didn’t realize this was an official press thing.”

“Oh. Is that a problem?” I was so used to being photographed when I went out with my friends that it hadn’t occurred to me that Trevor would have an issue with it. Especially since he was way more of a name than I was.

“Don’t take this the wrong way,” he said. “But I can’t be in photos with you that’ll get printed everywhere. My manager would freak.”

Wow. That was a first. And even though I understood and it wasn’t a big deal, it still felt like a slap in the face.

Rejection after rejection this week. It didn’t feel great.

I forced a smile, even as Daire’s words to stand up for myself echoed in my mind.

Whatever. This wasn’t a situation worth getting annoyed over.

“No problem,” I said. “Go ahead. I’ll meet you inside.”

I stood off to the side and watched my date make his way down the red carpet solo, followed by a figure all in black.

Daire. Taking up residence only a few feet away from Trevor and posing with a glare for the cameras.

It wasn’t even a close contest which way my attention drifted. Now that my eyes had been opened to Daire, I couldn’t seem to turn off the attraction. Not even after the shit he’d pulled this week. Not even after he’d flat-out told me this thing between us wouldn’t be going anywhere.

He may be easily able to believe that lie, but the truth in his eyes gave him away. He cared about me whether he knew it or not, and maybe that was the reason I couldn’t fully shut him out, as much as I’d tried to. I needed to move on, though it was clear Trevor wasn’t going to be the guy for me.

But Daire didn’t have to know that.

After doing the requisite step-and-repeat photos alone, I walked inside to meet up with my date, who’d at least gone and grabbed us a couple of drinks. Nonalcoholic, unfortunately, but that was what my flask was for.

I took the cup he offered. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Sorry about the red carpet thing.”

“Don’t even worry about it,” I said, waving him off. “Do we need to be careful in the concert hall too?”

“Nah. Unless there’s official photographers around, I’m not worried about it.”

“You do know the show will be livestreamed, right?”

Trevor blanched, hesitating with his drink at his lips. “Are you serious?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Shit.” He lowered his cup and seemed to think it over for a minute before shrugging. “You know what? Fuck it. It’s not like I’m closeted or anything.”

That should’ve made me feel better, but Daire chose that moment to walk by, and the heady scent of cologne in his wake did crazy things to my body.

I swallowed and tried not to watch as he and East disappeared into the concert hall.

“We should go inside,” I said, leading the way before Trevor could agree.

As the doors opened, the music coming out of the hall blasted, so much louder than any event I’d been to there, and I had to forgo shouting over the noise at Trevor and point in the direction we were going.

He took my hand, and I almost startled at the touch. But as soon as the shock wore off, I followed him through the shoulder-to-shoulder crowd and headed toward the front of the stage, where East had commandeered an area. It was no surprise that even at a “school function” we had our very own VIP area.

“I didn’t think this was a ticketed event.” Trevor’s lips brushed my ear as we stopped by the lowerclassman manning what East would call the “No-Go Zone” for the regular folk.

“Oh, it’s not. But East always likes to make sure he has the best seat in the house.”

“East?”

I flashed a smile at the man standing between the roped-off dance space and myself, and he immediately moved it aside.

“Yeah.” I chuckled and gestured over to where East was lounged back on a couch like a king on his throne. “James Easton.”

Trevor looked at East, but I couldn’t help but notice the broody bad boy sitting on the arm of the couch.

*Damn it.* Why’d Daire have to look so good tonight? With one leg hanging off the edge of the couch and the other bent up on the arm, he leaned back against the pillar behind him, his shirt parting and giving a sexy glimpse of his chest.

I really needed to stop looking at him. But as the spotlights flashed around the hall, they caught on the necklace he always wore, making it shine like a beacon. But instead of warning me away from danger, it seemed to lure me closer.

What I wouldn’t give to be able to hook a finger around that silver chain and draw him to me. To feel it fall down against my own naked chest as he hovered over the top of—

“Gavin?”

“Huh? What?” I quickly tore my eyes from Daire and turned back to Trevor, my *date*.

“I just asked if I should know who James Easton is?”

I chuckled and took a sip of my drink. “He would say yes, but the real answer is not unless you run in New York’s social circles.”

“Oh, okay. So he’s not *real* royalty or anything, just one of those Park Avenue Princes, like you?”

It was funny how the first time Trevor had mentioned our group, it sounded as though he was really interested. But this time it sounded almost condescending—or maybe I was mistaking his tone.

Lord knew East could be a pretentious ass, but with everything he’d done for me lately, it felt wrong to just stand there and let someone poke fun at him.

“He comes from a very influential family. They practically own half of the real estate in New York. Easton Tower ring a bell?”

“*That’s* his family?”

“Yep. So he’s royalty in his own way, I guess. Want me to introduce you?” The second the words were out of my mouth, I could’ve kicked myself. If he said yes I’d have to get within feet of Daire, and I wasn’t sure I was ready for that just yet.

Luckily for me, Professor King chose that exact moment to walk out onto the stage. The music faded as the spotlight found him. His dominating

presence immediately caused the entire student body to fall silent as he moved behind the microphone and scanned the crowd below.

You could've heard a pin drop as he slipped a hand into the pocket of his fitted charcoal pants, his tailored jacket brushing aside to reveal the tight fit of the caramel-colored sweater beneath. He was so effortlessly cool, the picture of suave masculinity, and his confidence was the thing of legends around Astor.

He was intimidating as hell.

"Evening, everyone." King's deep voice resonated through the crowd, creating a hum of excitement as we anxiously waited for him to introduce tonight's act. "I want to welcome Belladonna to our great school this evening and thank them for choosing Astor to debut their new album. They're one of the hottest upcoming bands, and we've told them we know how to have a good time here. Tonight, I want you to prove it to them. But also"—a rare and crooked smirk tugged at his lips—"*behave* yourselves."

A rowdy cheer thundered from the crowd as he stepped back from the mic and gestured to the curtain behind him. As it began to lift, King headed down the steps of the stage closest to us and then made his way to a man waiting for him in the shadows.

It was weird seeing your professors out of the lecture hall like this, seeing them interact with what definitely looked like a date, judging by the way the man took his hand and leaned down to whisper something in his ear.

It almost made him seem…human.

"Holy shit! This is insane," Trevor shouted by my ear as the band's frontwoman came into view and the entire hall lost their ever-loving minds. Then the instantly recognizable intro of their viral hit started up, and all talking got lost beneath the pulse-pounding beat.

Trevor wrapped an arm around my waist, pulling me in tight to his body, and as the heavy throb of Belladonna's breakout number flowed through my veins, I couldn't help but move to the infectious rhythm.

It was an upbeat number, one that made you want to grab hold of someone and move. I turned into Trevor's arms, looping mine around his neck, then shut my eyes and let myself go.

It felt good to be held. Good to be wanted. And as the sexed-up beat pulsed through me, my body started to react to the attention. My hips swayed a little closer to the ones grinding against me, and I gripped the

collar of Trevor's shirt. Heat and flames licked over my skin as the sensation of being watched caused a distinct ache to start between my thighs.

Trevor turned us, and my eyes latched on to a pair of dark ones staring at me. My breath caught somewhere in the back of my throat.

Daire remained in the exact spot I'd seen him minutes ago, sprawled out on the arm of the chair. But instead of watching the band up on the stage, his attention was locked on me. His midnight-colored hair had fallen down over his eyes and one of his hands rested between his legs, and when our gazes collided, that hand moved down between his thighs.

The lights flashed all around me, creating shadows that were messing with my head. There was no way Daire was watching me and rubbing his dick in public. There was no way he was licking his lips.

But when the lights flashed over in that corner, confirming what I was looking at, I stumbled and accidentally stepped on Trevor's foot, losing my balance.

"Shit, sorry."

"No problem." Trevor caught and righted me. "Let's just hope they didn't catch it on camera. That'd be super embarrassing."

*Really? It's not like I fell on my ass.*

I should've known that an up-and-coming actor would be *all* about his image. But for some reason I'd looked past it, hoping Trevor turned out to be different. Clearly, that had been a mistake.

My mind made up that this would definitely be our last date, I tried my best to laugh off his comment. "Yeah, I guess it would be."

Then I plastered on my best smile and pretended I was having a fantastic time, because I'd be damned if Daire saw me have anything else tonight—and I didn't even want to think about what he'd do if he caught Trevor in total superdouche mode.

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# TWENTY-NINE

## *daire*

THIS WAS GOING to be a long night.

The band wasn't terrible, but they weren't my thing. At all. The only good thing I could say was that they were so loud they drowned out the sound of my thoughts, at least for a moment. Because the second my eyes drifted from the singer to where Trevor and Gavin were dancing so close they practically merged into one, those thoughts came back louder, and with a vengeance.

Gavin was holding that fucker close, his arms looped around his neck, while the Tool's hands moved down to the top of Gavin's ass.

My first instinct was to get up, rip Trevor's arms off, and glue them to his own ass.

But I didn't have a claim on Gavin, so that would be a little extreme, even for me.

I shifted focus as Gavin closed his eyes, swaying to the music. I liked the way he got lost in it. That he didn't care who was around while he enjoyed himself and let go.

As his head fell back, exposing all that smooth, creamy skin, I pictured how easy it would be for me to lean in and press my lips along his sharp jaw before moving down to lick and suck along his neck. I'd feel his moan against my mouth, quietly begging for more. With every roll of his hips, his erection would graze mine, provoking me in all the right ways. I'd haul him in closer to give him something to grind against, and he'd take it, not giving a damn who was watching as he got himself off on me—

“I’m all for putting on a show, but that’s not usually your thing,” Travis shouted over the music, and reality snapped back again, Gavin no longer in my arms but in Trevor’s.

I looked up to glare at Travis, who stood beside me with an amused tilt to his lips. When he nodded pointedly at my hips, I glanced down to see I’d been stroking my dick through my pants.

*What the hell?*

When I jerked my hand away, Travis chuckled. “Please don’t stop on my account. I enjoy watching a good public rubdown.”

“Oh fuck off.” I shifted, trying to adjust myself, but it only strangled my cock to the point I had to stand up to give it some room.

“Something got you riled up?” Travis said, arching a brow. A thin line of glitter lined his eyes, shimmering under the flashing lights.

“Not a thing.” I shook my head, forcing myself to look anywhere but in Gavin’s direction. I’d made things crystal clear with him, so there was no point in caring whom he decided to spend his time with. Or grind himself all up on.

Nope. It didn’t affect me one little bit.

Travis snorted and rolled his eyes. “You’re such an idiot.”

I turned to pin him with a stare. “*Excuse* me?”

To his credit, he didn’t back down the way most would. Instead, he inclined his head toward where Gavin was dancing and singing along. “What are you doing, just watching?”

I ground my jaw tight. “I don’t dance.”

“I’m not talking about dancing, dumbass.”

My head swiveled in his direction. “You have a death wish?”

“I guess so, ’cause I’m tired of you mooning over the guy and fucking it up.”

What the hell was he talking about? Fucking what up?

“I get you’re trying to maintain your whole loner asshole image,” Travis continued, “but you’re gonna regret watching him move on from you. Trust me.”

I ignored the stab in my chest. “Nobody asked you.”

“Let me guess, you think you’re not good enough. But then, no one ever will be, and by the time you realize that, you’ve lost your chance.”

Jesus, it was like he was inside my head, reading my mind.

“Don’t you have somewhere else you could be?”

“Probably, but you seem to be in need of my extensive knowledge of self-denial.”

Now that was a fucking laugh—Travis was the king of excess, whether it involved drinking, fucking, or just having a good time. “Nice try, but you and self-denial don’t exactly go hand in hand. When was the last time you ever denied yourself anything?”

Travis looked to the back of a tall guy in a pair of ripped jeans, dress shirt, and a slouch beanie sucking face with a blonde in a tight corset showing off her huge rack.

Caleb Reeves. Of *course* that’s who Travis was talking about.

“Yeah, well, that’s totally fucking different,” I said. “You could always cut in.”

Travis scoffed. “In this situation, you have more of a chance than I do at getting what you want.” He put up a hand when I started to deny it. “And don’t tell me you don’t want him. It goes beyond whatever stunt you pulled the other day. You thought you could fuck and flee *Gavin*? There’s no way that didn’t just rope you in tighter.”

Goddammit, why wouldn’t he just shut up already? I didn’t need him acting like a mirror and pointing out the obvious. The part I’d pushed so far back it was easy to pretend like it didn’t exist.

I looked back over to where Gavin wiped at his forehead, already getting sweaty in the crowd.

Fuck, that wasn’t enticing. Not at all.

Travis leaned in close. “*He* thinks you’re enough. Why don’t you?”

My heart stuttered, and all of a sudden it was hard to breathe. I couldn’t seem to look away as Trevor lowered his mouth to Gavin’s ear to say something before pressing a kiss there. *There.* Where I’d been fantasizing putting my own lips.

It was wrong. All of this was wrong. Gavin didn’t belong in anyone else’s arms. He belonged in mine.

As his date grabbed their empty cups and moved through the crowd, leaving Gavin alone to watch the band, my vision tunneled, everything around me going dark. Everything except for Gavin.

My mind made up, I started forward, the faint “Go get him” from Travis a mantra in my head as I weaved through the crowd to the man with the shock of platinum hair.

Gavin's back was to me, his guard down, and I figured that was for the best, because there was no way to hide what I was feeling, and I didn't want him to bolt. It was as though I was tethered to him, and nothing and nobody better get in my way.

I needed to touch him. *Needed* to taste him. The craving was at an all-time high as I stalked my gorgeous roommate, having no clue how to do this, just knowing I *needed* to.

As though he sensed the second I was within his orbit, Gavin spun around to see me only feet away. I reached out, snaking an arm around his trim waist, and when he didn't protest, I pulled him in hard against my body.

Confusion swirled in his eyes as he placed steadying hands on my chest. Then he swept the tip of his tongue along his plump lower lip, and my dick throbbed.

"End your date." My voice was rough and low.

"End my—"

"*Date*." I bent my head until my lips were by his ear. "Tell him you got a sudden fever and really should go home to bed…with me."

Gavin jerked back, his eyes searching my face, and for a second I thought he'd tell me to fuck off—until that second passed and he still had a death grip on my shirt.

"What? Why would I tell him that?"

"Because we both know nothing he can do is going to cure *this*." I smoothed my hand down to his ass and held him in place, grinding my hard cock against his.

Gavin sucked in a shaky breath, and I dug my fingers into the soft material covering his ass. I could feel his dick throbbing behind the zipper of his pants, and I couldn't help myself. I was going to use every card in my hand to win him back tonight. Even if that meant playing dirty.

"Come home with me."

"D… What are you doing?"

"You said I couldn't have it both ways. So I'm pickin' a way." I put my lips to his glistening temple and licked at the salty skin there. "I want to run my tongue all over you. And I want to be inside you when I do it."

"Oh God." Gavin's hands twisted in my shirt, pulling me closer. His leg rubbed along mine as he writhed against me to the new song playing somewhere in my periphery. "I… I…"

But as suddenly as it started, Gavin shoved me back a step, his eyes stormy, clouded with arousal.

"Don't. Don't do this to me again if you don't mean it."

I'd thought he was going to say no, but as his eyes trailed down over my body and stopped to rest on my thick erection, I realized how wrong I was.

He didn't want me to stop. He wanted me to promise that I *wouldn't.*

I knew I should walk away, leave before I did something stupid to screw everything up. But instead, I moved in closer and took his chin in hand, tilting his face up so I could brush my lips over his.

"Meet me back at our place."

"D—"

"*Meet* me."

Gavin blinked, his dark lashes kissing the pale skin of his cheeks, and when he nodded, I forced myself to let him go.

It was up to him now. I'd warned him off, given him *so* many chances to run. It was dangerous for him to wade into these waters with me. I didn't know what I was doing. But if he came to me tonight, all bets were off.

Gavin would be mine.

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# THIRTY

## *gavin*

MY HAND WAS shaking as I reached for the door handle of our apartment, and I pulled it back, hesitating.

If I walked in there now, I was putting my heart on the line. It could get absolutely pulverized, ripped into tiny little pieces I wasn't sure I'd be able to put back together again.

Daire wasn't a safe bet. Not by any means. Yet something about him called to me in a way no one ever had before. I could see the flashes of vulnerability, the part of him that hungered for a real connection—I felt that deep down. That was why I hadn't been able to shut the door on him, not completely. It was why I'd just left my date at the concert, feigning illness.

This could be a monumental mistake. Daire might want nothing more than another fuck, but he didn't need me for that. He could have anyone.

Maybe, just maybe, he wanted this too.

Swallowing hard, I forced myself to turn the handle and step inside.

The lights were low, like no one was home, but Daire paced the room, running his hand through his hair. At the sound of the door opening, his head jerked up, and the sharp relief on his face had my pulse kicking up.

He'd thought I wasn't coming.

As someone who rarely gave any fucks, he'd been *worried*.

I closed the door and had barely taken more than a couple of steps when he rushed toward me, sweeping me up in his arms. His mouth crashed down on mine, and just like that, I was lost, caught up in the way his hold on me tightened, not allowing even an inch to come between us, as he kissed me

like he owned me. Like I'd always been his and he'd only just realized what he'd been missing.

I curled my fingers in his hair, drawing in every bit of his breath as our tongues met in fervent strokes. My head was spinning, reality not setting in, because God, this felt like a dream. Our first time together had been so quick and intense that I hadn't gotten to explore Daire. Not the way he kissed, not the possessive way he ran his hands up and down my back. Not how thoroughly he tasted me as he cradled my head in his strong fighter hands.

"I thought you'd never get here…" he panted, pulling his mouth from mine. His eyes traced every line and feature of my face as I drew him close and rested my forehead to his.

"I was always here." I drew a hand down and rested it over his heart, my meaning clear, even though I wasn't brave enough to voice it.

Daire closed his eyes, smoothing his hands down to my lower back as he urged my body in close to his. The frantic kiss from seconds ago was replaced by a stamp of ownership. A hard press of his lips to mine.

"Daire?" His name was practically a moan, the physical doing its best to override the emotional. But there was something I wanted, something I'd been dreaming about, since the first time Daire kissed me right here in our apartment.

"Hmm?"

"Will you take me to your bedroom?"

His lips quirked, adding an almost boyish quality to his devilish good looks. "Sleepy?"

"Definitely not."

Daire took my hand and began to walk backward to his room. His gaze traveled a wicked path from my head to my toes, as though I were already naked.

"Red looks good on you."

My heart skipped at the compliment, the same one he'd given me earlier. But there was no mistaking what he meant this time as he led me into his room. He liked how I looked tonight.

"Oh yeah? So I should wear it more often?"

"I mean, you could." Daire drew me to a stop at the end of his bed, then hooked a finger under my chin until I was looking up at him. "Or we could see how it looks on my bedroom floor."

Daire had always had a mysterious vibe about him that was sexy. But this bad-boy charm aimed my way almost made my knees give out.

“Let’s do that.” I started to shrug out of the jacket, but Daire was impatient, peeling it off and tossing it aside. It landed in a heap in the corner of the room, and he smirked.

“Better,” he said, those dark eyes glinting dangerously as they traveled down to my lips. He couldn’t seem to help himself from brushing his mouth over mine again, and I grinned, letting him take what he wanted.

“What about this?” I reached for his hands, bringing them up to the buttons of my shirt. “Think this’ll look better on your floor?”

“Only one way to find out.” With a firm pull, he yanked my shirt from the waist of my pants and began to unbutton them from the bottom. As he made his way up, parting the material, he planted hungry kisses along my neck that set me on fire.

He blazed a trail that made my toes curl, and it was all I could do to stand upright under the magnitude of what was happening. Daire was taking his time, enjoying me, teasing my collarbone with the tip of his tongue as he pushed my shirt off my shoulders. It soon joined my jacket on the floor, leaving my chest bare for his hands to roam over before his mouth followed.

I couldn’t look away when he glanced up at me with hooded eyes dark with desire. The same desire that pooled low in my stomach and between my thighs.

He flicked his tongue along one nipple, greedily sucking on the sensitive tip and making me gasp, before moving to the other and repeating the move. I squeezed the fingers I had twisted in his hair and couldn’t stop watching as his mouth covered every inch of my skin. His tongue drew a path down to my navel, where he teased a circle.

Daire’s mouth was relentless as he reached for the button of my pants and popped it open.

“Now, these,” he said, drawing down the zipper, “would definitely look better on my floor.”

A flirty grin hit my lips and I nodded. “Then what are you waiting for?”

Daire slipped his fingers inside my pants and pulled them down my legs. I toed out of my shoes, and as he helped me the rest of the way, he tossed it all aside and sat back on his heels to look up at me.

“Fuckin’ hell.” His eyes mapped every inch of me as I stood in front of him in nothing more than a red Versace thong. “You look incredible.”

I dragged my lower lip behind my teeth, the look on his face making the throb between my legs intensify.

“Turn around.” Daire’s order was gruff as he ran a rough palm over the bulge in his jeans. “I need to see the back of— Fuck me. *Gavin…*”

The groan that filled the room had me glancing back to see Daire’s attention fixed on the smooth curves of my ass.

“You like?”

Daire dragged his eyes up to mine, the heat in them threatening to incinerate the room as he unbuttoned his jeans. “So damn much.”

As I turned back to face him, Daire moved up to his knees, running his hands up the backs of my legs, behind my thighs, and when he reached my ass, I slid my hands back into his hair.

“You don’t think these would look good on your floor?”

“I think these look fucking phenomenal exactly where they are.” Daire pressed a kiss just beneath my navel, sucking on the taut skin there. “The building and lights outside shining on you in nothing but these… What a goddamn sight.”

His warm breath teased my impatient cock through the material holding it hostage as he glanced up at me.

“Let me enjoy them a little longer.”

I fisted my hands in his hair and drew him forward, a shiver racking my body as his lips moved over the tight fabric covering me, and he began to kiss his way up and down my rigid dick. My heart thundered as he reached the head, sucking me through the flimsy material until it was soaked through, my pre-cum making as much of a mess of the inside as he was the outside.

As he gripped my bare ass tight, I began to grind against him, looking for some kind of relief. The feel of his mouth on me was an exquisite kind of torture I’d never imagined.

“Daire…”

A rumbling growl echoed around the room as Daire lifted his head, slipped his fingers under the elastic band at my waist, and pulled it down over my ass.

“Now they can go.”

I stepped out of the thong, never more aware of how naked I was compared to Daire's clothed self—but also fully aware that'd I'd never felt sexier.

Daire had gone quiet, so quiet you could've heard a pin drop, as he seemed to memorize every inch of my body. The only sign he was alive was the quiet breaths he took and his flared nostrils. He was intensely focused, and when he finally brought his attention up to my face, the expression in his eyes was full of lustful adoration.

"C'mere." He crooked his finger, and I took the step needed to bring me within touching distance. The second I was there, he reached out and ran a hand down the side of my thigh to my knee. "Hook it over my shoulder."

"Your—"

He added a slight pressure behind my knee. "Shoulder."

I swallowed and reached for him, running my hands through his hair for balance as I lifted my right leg and did what he'd asked. The position put my hard-on mere inches from his face—something he was pretty damn pleased about, judging by his wicked grin.

"Now hold on." Daire leaned forward, and the second his tongue touched the stiff length throbbing between my legs, I braced for impact.

Like flames licking over my skin, Daire drew a path up the underside of my cock with his tongue, swiping it over the head and tonguing at the weeping slit.

Oh *God*. It was all I could do to obey his orders and hold on like he'd said, because he'd barely put his mouth on me and already I was shaking. For a second I worried my leg wouldn't be able to hold me up, but Daire had such a strong grip on me that there was no way he'd let me fall.

Looking up at me, he flicked his tongue along the tip before drawing me in, sucking me deep into his mouth.

I let out an incoherent curse as he took me all the way to the back of his throat—and then swallowed.

The contraction of his muscles around my cock was so intense I struggled to breathe. No way in hell was I getting this far with Daire only to blow early. I wanted him to do his worst, to ravage me in any way he wanted to.

He drew his mouth off me, and the loss of him had me impatient, wanting back inside his warm, wet heat. But then he wrapped his hand around my dick, giving it slow pulls as he licked his lips.

“Your fucking cock.” Daire groaned and sucked on my head. “So goddamn perfect. All of you…”

A shiver rolled through me, and I tightened my grip on him. He couldn’t have known the way his words affected me, but all I’d wanted was for Daire to see me. I just hadn’t realized how literally that desire would manifest.

As the urgent need for him to keep going and take me deeper slammed into me like a crashing wave, I thrust my hips forward, only for Daire to answer with a growl.

Not one of those angry, dangerous growls he gave to everyone else, but one so primal, so ravenous, that I felt in my bones that he was about to destroy me.

And I was going to love every depraved second.

Daire’s arms locked under my thighs. One second my foot was on the ground, and the next my ass was in the air as Daire stood up, holding me like I didn’t weigh anything. He threw me on the bed, and as he hovered over me, his dark eyes glittered savagely.

In the moonlight, with his hair wild from my hands in it and his tattoos like shadows across his skin, he looked every bit a man with no control. And there was nothing more on this Earth that I’d ever wanted than for him to lose it…with me.

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# THIRTY-ONE

## *daire*

THE PICTURE GAVIN made lying on my bed, naked and spread out for me, was like some kind of heavenly creature I wanted to corrupt. His flushed cock rested thick and heavy on his stomach, his pale skin highlighted by the dark covers I'd tossed over my mattress earlier that day.

Jesus, he was so fucking beautiful it was difficult to tear my eyes away. But when he started to shift up my bed, I made myself, reaching for his ankle and holding him in place.

"Running away so soon?"

"No," he said, biting into his lower lip. "Just making room for you."

"You don't have to move up for that." I stroked a finger over his ankle. "You just gotta spread these apart."

A slow, sensual smile crossed his mouth as he parted his legs and planted them flat on the mattress.

Gavin's body was a work of fucking art as he put it on full display for my greedy eyes.

I tore at my shirt, not giving a damn if I'd be able to rebutton it in the morning. All I knew in that moment was that I wanted to be as naked as he was, and then I wanted to rub myself all over him.

My boots went next, kicked aside as I unzipped my jeans and started to shove them down my hips, and when everything was off, and I was about to move down onto the mattress—

"Wait."

I glanced down to see that Gavin had pulled a couple of pillows under his head, his eyes locked on my naked body as I straightened back to my

full height.

“Give me a second to look at you.”

Damn, he surprised me at every turn. It seemed like I brought out the brave side of him, the feisty side. I already knew he liked fighting with me. So it shouldn’t have come as such a shock that he’d bring the same kind of energy when it came to fucking me.

I held my arms out to the side, letting him look his fill, and when he gestured for me to turn, I chuckled.

“Payback?”

“Not for me.” I could practically hear the smirk in his voice. “I’m enjoying the hell out of this. There. Stop right there.”

I paused so that my back was to him, and directly opposite me was my reflection in the full-length mirror that hung on the bathroom door. That sneaky little shit—now he had a visual of my front *and* back. Why hadn’t I thought of that?

“How long you been planning this moment?”

“Not long. I was inspired when you bent over to take off your jeans.”

I understood that. It was amazing what a tight ass could do for your sense of imagination. When I glanced back to the bed, I found Gavin pumping his dick in slow, rough pulls.

“Ever since I saw you in the shower, I promised myself I’d take a second to look at your tattoos while I—”

“Fuck your fist?” I eyed his moving hand. “You sure you don’t want me over there while you do that?

“So impatient…” Gavin arched his hips up, thrusting his dick through his hand. “Anyone would think you’re hard up or something.”

That damn tease. I was going to destroy him when I finally got my hands on him. But for now I’d let him look his fill. After all, I’d made him do the same when I first undressed him.

“D?”

“What?” To anyone else, I would’ve sounded pissed off, but Gavin knew better.

“Come fuck me.”

It was a miracle I didn’t come right then. But somehow I managed to hold it together as I turned to see Gavin’s thighs in a wide straddle, his dick glistening with the sticky pre-cum that had been leaking all over his hand.

When I moved onto the bed this time, he didn't stop me. Instead, his eyes pleaded for me to hurry as I shifted between his legs and batted his hand out of my way. I wrapped my fingers around his shaft and lowered my head down to drag my tongue from base to tip, getting off on the taste of his salty essence.

I'd wanted to spend time here, teasing and tasting his delicious cock. But after his impromptu request, and those three words he'd just said, there was no way I would be able to draw this out. Not when all I could think about now was getting back inside him.

"Dammit, Daire." Gavin's hands fisted in the sheets. "If you don't get inside me—"

His words cut off with a gasp as I lowered my mouth over him, wanting one last taste before I gave him exactly what he was asking for.

Smirking, I lifted up off him and rose to my knees. "Now that's one way to shut you up."

He narrowed his eyes, looking like he was about to tell me off in his smartassed way, when I reached over him to grab some lube and a condom out of my nightstand.

"What?" I said as I rolled the rubber on over my throbbing dick and flipped open the bottle cap. "Nothing to say now?"

Gavin arched his hips impatiently. "Please?"

I slicked up my dick, making sure to coat my fingers, then I moved on top of him, chest to chest. Lowering my hand between his thighs, I pressed the pad of my index finger against his entrance and made slow circles. "Now's not the time to be quiet."

He sucked in a deep breath. "Please…"

"I'm all for begging if you fuckin' shout it."

His restlessness must've been riding him as hard as I was about to, because this time when he shoved his hips up, his shout for "more" echoed off the walls.

And because I was an obliging bastard, I pushed my finger inside him, slowly in and out, wanting him good and stretched for the hours I planned to keep him here in my bed.

I added another, spreading my digits inside him and memorizing the little gasps he made. They were so sexy that it would be a miracle if I could make this last.

Gavin lifted his head, kissing the sensitive spot beneath my ear. “Give me all of you. I need it.”

Like I was able to deny him anything. Not in that moment.

And even though I knew this could set a precedent for giving him anything he wanted, I did it anyway.

I withdrew my fingers and moved back to my knees. Reaching for my cock, I lined it up with his puckered hole and took a deep breath as I pushed my way inside.

*Oh…fuck.*

Barely a couple inches inside him and my breath whooshed out of me like someone had slammed into my back. It wasn’t just the way he felt like ecstasy wrapped around my dick. It was the way he looked up at me, his light eyes suddenly dark, dilated with arousal.

He grasped at my hips, wanting even more and groaning softly when I gave him what he needed.

It didn’t occur to me until I was deep inside him that I never took anyone like this. Never face to face. That was too intimate, too personal. Fucking was always just a release, nothing more.

But I couldn’t stop staring at Gavin as I eased out of him and slowly pushed back in. So many emotions flickered across his face that I couldn’t keep up.

As I began thrust into him a little faster, he reached up, curling his finger around my necklace to pull me down on top of him, and I let him, let him sink his hand into my hair to keep me where he wanted me while he sucked on my tongue.

All the while I sank into him, deeper and faster, my ass clenching tight on every thrust and sweat beading my brow. Reaching between us, I fisted my hand around his cock, jacking him off in time with the drive of my hips.

“God yes,” Gavin murmured against my lips. “Fuck me harder.”

The man beneath me was no breakable thing, because with every plunge inside his body, my headboard slammed into the wall. And still he wrapped his strong legs around me so I couldn’t go anywhere.

Sweat slid down my cheek, dropping onto his, and when he licked at the spot, my balls clenched. Gavin was sexier than anything I could have dreamed up, and I knew I’d remember the sounds coming from him later, when I was alone.

I stared down at him, memorizing his flushed face, the slick hair sticking to his forehead and his parted lips, and had no idea what I'd done to deserve him. But I sure as hell was going to enjoy him.

Gavin reached over his head to grip the headboard, tightening his legs at the base of my spine, and I braced my hand by his head and brushed my lips over his.

"Holding on?"

Gavin flexed his thighs around my hips. "Do your worst."

I sucked on his lower lip, making him moan, then started to move, driving inside of his sweet hole at a steady pace. I wanted to take him, push him toward that ultimate high where he would need something to hold on to as he fell the fuck apart.

With our eyes locked and our bodies fused, I released his dick to brace both hands by his head. His cock was making a mess all over us, and it was clear he was ready to explode with or without my hand. So instead, I'd give him the ride of his fucking life.

I curled my fingers in the covers by Gavin's head, and he nodded at me, knowing exactly what was about to happen next.

I began a relentless rhythm, driving into him, out of control as I lost myself in the most gorgeous man I'd ever known. For the first time in my life, I wished there wasn't a barrier between us so I could come inside him, marking him there.

"I need you."

Gavin's words were barely audible between us as he let out a cry, arching his back when his arousal erupted between us. The picture he made had me following him into a climax that detonated with a shout. I didn't recognize my own voice as I pounded into him, the grip his hot hole had on me like a vise milking me for all I was worth.

The world seemed to spin on its axis, refusing to right itself until Gavin wrapped his arms around my neck, holding me tight as we both came down from the epic release.

I was breathing harder than I did after a fight, and not just from the physical effort. Something inside me felt irrevocably changed, and I wondered if it was the wall I kept up crumbling a little.

But…I'd think about that tomorrow.

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# THIRTY-TWO

## *gavin*

THE SOUND OF a heartbeat, steady and strong, filtered through my dream. In it, I was lying draped over Daire, my head on his chest, and one of my legs tangled with his. Even in sleep he had a protective hold on me, his arm wrapped around my waist, keeping me close.

I didn't want to wake up.

Here, I could pretend I'd spent all night in his bed as he took me over and over again, never getting enough. Here, I could imagine he'd wanted me to stay for as long as I wanted to. To wake up together, like we were more to each other than a quick fuck. That it wasn't just our bodies that fit together so well.

I felt so safe. Protected. Wanted. Desired. Why would I want to be anywhere else?

With a happy sigh, I curled into him, shifting carefully so I didn't wake him. But Dream Daire roused anyway, his eyes still closed as he began to slowly run his fingers through my hair.

Yeah, this was definitely a dream. The move was too gentle to come from Reality Daire, who had nothing gentle about him. Not his words, not his personality, and not at all the sexy, sharply defined muscles I'd spent half of my dream tracing with my tongue.

Just the thought of doing that again had my heart beating a little faster.

Wait—that wasn't my heartbeat that was speeding up. That was—

I opened my eyes as the hand in my hair ran down my neck to my back. The pulsing beneath my ear belonged to the warm body I was lying across, his chest serving as my pillow.

As the dream faded and awareness began to kick in, I realized where I was.

Dark grey walls with even darker curtains. Metal accents spaced throughout the large room, giving it an edgy street style. And wood floors that were bare except for the heap of clothes Daire had taken off us.

Holy shit, I hadn't been dreaming at all.

With a start, I jerked my head up, and Daire's eyes flew open in alarm.

"What's wrong?" Even barely awake and his voice gravel-rough with sleep, Daire lifted up onto his elbows like he was ready to jump out of bed and take care of whatever the emergency was.

There wasn't an emergency. Unless you counted the shock rolling through me.

"I'm…" I swallowed, blinking him into focus as the morning sun sliced a path across the bed. "I'm in your room."

Daire tilted his head to the side, dark brows slashed low. "Yeah. And?"

"I was here all night?" I wasn't sure why that came out as a question when the answer was obvious, but my brain couldn't seem to wrap itself around this. I'd rarely set foot in Daire's room, much less slept there. He'd said so many times around the guys that he wasn't the "see you in the morning" type.

He dropped his head back on the pillow, pulling me along with him so I was lying on his shoulder.

"You seem surprised," he said. "Need a reminder of what went down last night?"

Before I could answer, he lowered his mouth to my ear.

"Namely me."

Now *that* I remembered in full, picture-perfect detail. It would be stamped there for all eternity, because nothing, *nothing* was hotter than Daire Connery with my cock in his mouth.

When my dick jerked against his thigh at the memory, Daire's rough chuckle vibrated against my cheek.

"Glad you enjoyed it," he said, moving his hand to my bare hip and brushing his thumb across my skin. "Because I sure as hell did."

He touched me freely, and it felt so good and so right that all I could do was melt into him, even though there was nothing soft about his body. I fit against him perfectly, and I couldn't have forced back my happy sigh if I tried.

Closing my eyes, I let my hand drift over the contours of his stomach and up to his smooth and hairless chest.

I trailed my fingers between his pecs. “You don’t have any hair here.”

“That’s because fuckers will grab on to whatever they can to win a fight.”

“Even *body* hair?”

“Anything.” A beat passed. “That bother you?”

“That people might rip your body parts off?”

“No.” He chuckled. “That I don’t have any body hair.”

I looked down at the ink decorating his skin and traced my fingers over his upper arm, over the intricate design of a lion with a barbed-wire crown.

“I like your tattoos. I like looking at them.”

“Oh, is that what you’re doin’? Looking at them?” He eyed my fingers. “Feels more like you’re coloring them in.”

“Maybe I just like touching you.”

Daire shoved up off the bed and rolled me to my back. “And maybe I like having you touch me.”

My breath caught as I stared up at him, studying his harsh features and the way his hair almost softened them as it fell down into his eyes. “Maybe?”

“Definitely. But don’t think that means I’m going soft or anything.”

So tough. That was Daire. Even when he was in bed with someone who was naked and vulnerable, opening themselves up, he was always on guard. I’d have to work on that.

I hooked a finger around the chain dangling from his neck and drew him down, grazing my lips over his.

“I don’t think there’s anything *soft* about you.”

His lips curved against mine, and I chuckled.

“And I don’t just mean *that*.”

“Yeah, but you have to admit, *that* is pretty impressive.”

I did, and would if anyone asked, but as far as I was concerned that secret would stay with me for as long as possible. The last thing I needed was for other guys to work out how good Daire was in bed. I’d just gotten my hands on him, and I wasn’t about to let someone else snatch him away.

My stomach dropped at the thought. The idea of someone else kissing or touching Daire was like a knife twisting in my gut.

“Gavin?”

I blinked his face back into view and saw a frown of concern marring his brow.

“You okay?”

“I…” I tried for a smile but ended up nodding. “Yeah, I’m good.”

Daire’s eyes narrowed, and he rolled off me to settle by my side, propping his head in his hand to stare down at me.

“Then what was that about?”

“Uh, nothing.”

“Why are you lyin’ to me?”

“I’m—” I clamped my lips shut and let out a sigh. He was right—I *was* lying. But the idea of telling him that I didn’t want anyone else to touch him the way I just had made me nervous.

Daire wasn’t exactly the pour-your-heart-out, monogamous kind, and getting him here—naked beside me—hadn’t been easy. So the idea of admitting I wanted not only to do this again, but wanted him to only be with me, had me fumbling.

“Gavin? Did I hurt you last night?”

“What? No.” Of course that was where his mind went. Ever the protector. It was just one more reason for my heart to do that little skip it did whenever I thought about him. “You didn’t hurt me. Last night was… It was perfect.”

The concern from seconds ago slipped away behind a wall I was all too familiar with. The idea that he was the reason for my happiness was something he wasn’t comfortable with at all, and that was both heartbreaking and incredibly frustrating.

Why couldn’t he see what an amazing human being he was?

“You don’t think it was?” I asked, not sure I was ready for the answer. Because if he pulled back, if he shut me out while I was lying here naked beside him, I wasn’t sure I would ever recover.

But when he rolled to his back and said, “I didn’t say that,” my chest tightened.

I scooted in closer to him, keeping my eyes on him as he stared up at the ceiling. I didn’t want to spook him. I just wanted to get closer, and that was going to take care and patience. I needed to tread lightly here.

“*Sooo* you might possibly want to do this again?”

Daire’s lips twitched. “Yeah, I think I might want that.”

“With me?”

“You see anyone else in this bed?”

I grabbed hold of the covers and lifted them up, looking down at his phenomenal body. “Nope. No one else.”

Daire snorted and tugged me into his side, and I laid my hand over his steadily thumping heart.

“There better not be. I’m the only one allowed this close to your naked body.”

Heat swirled in my stomach at his claim. While he might not freely admit to having softer, gentler feelings, this showed me he cared.

How much? Well, that was another question. One I needed to ask. I needed to know where he stood with all of this.

Was this a casual thing? Or was it more?

“D?”

“Hmm?”

“What *was* last night?”

His chest rose beneath my hand on a deep inhale. “Do we have to analyze it?”

Not exactly the answer I wanted. “I don’t want to analyze it. I just want to know what it meant to you. Was it just last night? Or do you want more?”

I closed my eyes and held my breath, my heart pounding a mile a minute as I waited for his answer.

“I’m no good at this stuff.” Daire’s voice was reflective as I lay there willing him to say more and then he added, “But I don’t want this to be it.”

I let out a breath, squeezing my eyes shut as I gave a mental fist bump to the air.

*Holy shit.* I’d just gotten Daire—*Daire*—to admit he wanted more than a quick roll in the sheets with me. This was huge. It was…monumental. And I needed to calm down or he was going to freak out.

Steadying myself, I opened my eyes and, with much more calm than I was actually feeling, smiled. “You don’t?”

“No. Why, do you?”

“No.” I quickly shook my head. “No. I *want* to do this again. Like, many times, again. I just want to know, I mean, if we do this, I just want it to be us.”

Daire jackknifed up in bed, a thunderous scowl settling onto his features.

“You think I’m gonna sit here and watch another guy touch you in front of me? Fuck that, Gavin. I don’t do threesomes, and I don’t fuckin’ share.”

My eyes popped open at his outburst. That was so *not* what I was getting at.

“Daire.” I had to bite down on my lip to hold back my laugh as I reached for his arm, trying to calm him. “I didn’t mean that. I meant I don’t want to *see* anyone else—or sleep with them—while I’m with you, and vice versa.”

“Oh.”

I couldn’t help my chuckle then. “But for the record, I’m not into threesomes either.”

“Better fuckin’ not be,” he grumbled, and leaned back against his headboard. “I kind of like my freedom.”

I shifted up the bed until I was sitting beside him. “No need to kill anyone. I just want you.” I laced my fingers through his. “It’s only been you for a while now.”

The room fell silent, and for a moment I thought I’d gone too far—until I heard him let out a steady breath. Was that relief? I hoped so, because that was how I felt knowing that he was finally mine. Well, for the time being, anyway.

I studied him closely as he sat there with his eyes closed. His angular jaw line, the dark shadow covering it, his full lips that had driven me wild last night, and his necklace glinting in the morning light.

“Who’s that on your necklace?” I asked.

Daire didn’t open his eyes as he reached up and touched the silver oval resting against his skin. “St. Jude.”

“A saint?” That was surprising. There were many things I’d associate Daire with, but a saint wasn’t one of them.

“Yeah. The saint of lost and hopeless causes.”

My heart broke a little at the idea that Daire saw himself in such a way. “Do you really think you’re a hopeless case?”

Daire opened his eyes, and this close I could see all the self-doubt and loathing he usually hid so well swirling there.

“Bit hard not to when the two people in the world who were meant to love you don’t.”

“Daire—”

“It’s okay—they wanted to travel. A baby kind of fucks that up. But if they didn’t want me, not sure why anyone else would.” He shrugged, trying to brush the comment off, but it was no use. That kind of damage, the kind that came from being abandoned by your parents, would leave indelible scars.

Scars it was clear he didn’t want to talk about, at least not now.

“You’re *not* a hopeless cause, Daire. You’re one of the most loyal and protective people I know.”

He didn’t say anything to that, so I slipped down the bed and snuggled in under his arm, laying my hand over the top of St. Jude.

“*I* want you,” I whispered.

“I don’t know why.” He let out a sigh and shook his head. “What are you doin’ here with me?”

Understanding him a little better now, I reached up and cradled his cheek. “I live here.”

Daire’s lips curved, that rare, *rare* smile coming out just for me. “That’s not what I meant.”

“I know. But you don’t need to ask. You already know.” He frowned, and I leaned up to brush a kiss over his lips. “I’m here because I *want* to be here. And D?”

“Hmm?”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

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## THIRTY-THREE

*daire*

“WE OFFICIALLY SLEPT through breakfast,” Gavin said as he opened the fridge and stared at its contents. It was pretty bare, as neither of us was much of a cook, and he wrinkled his nose and shut the door. “I’ll order us some lunch.”

“Good idea.” My stomach let out a low rumble, and Gavin laughed and opened a side drawer to pull out a menu for one of the restaurants downstairs.

“Some of everything?”

“Damn right.” I reached for the bag of coffee beans, but it wasn’t enough for the both of us. “Add large coffees to that.”

“On it.” Gavin glanced up and winked at me, and the way that one simple move had my chest tightening was crazy.

He’d done himself a favor and thrown on a pair of pajama bottoms instead of walking around in that fucking thong from last night, because I was sure his ass was feeling it today. I hadn’t been easy on him, not with his begging for more in my ears, and I couldn’t promise I wouldn’t want to get my hands on him if he paraded around with his perfect ass cheeks out.

Even now, bent over the kitchen island shirtless, it was hard not to want to be closer to him.

Who the hell was I?

Food and sex weren’t the only things I was craving, though, and I headed to my room to throw on a shirt and grab a pack of cigarettes and my lighter.

“Be back in a few,” I said, shoving my phone in my pocket. Gavin was already on the phone ordering our food, and when he nodded at me, I left and took the elevator up to the roof.

I hadn’t had a smoke since before the concert last night, so this was probably some new kind of record for me. I’d replaced my craving for nicotine with exploring Gavin’s body. Couldn’t say I regretted that choice. At all.

I squinted under the harsh afternoon sun as I stepped out onto the roof. It wasn’t time for the pool to open yet, so there weren’t as many people up here as there would be in a month or two. Bypassing the more comfortable outdoor seating, I made my way to a corner of the roof and slid a deck chair over to plop my ass on.

There was nothing like the view of the city from the top of the Towers. It was the one place that brought me even a semblance of peace, and that was only when a bunch of other fuckers weren’t around.

Lighting up, I took a deep drag, blowing the smoke out in the direction of One World Trade Center, its massive height dominating downtown in the distance. Somewhere between here and there, my parents were probably still around, out shopping or barhopping or whatever the hell they did with their time in the city. I wouldn’t know. Same as I didn’t know why that thought had just popped into my head out of nowhere.

What did I care if they were close by or on a whole different planet? I didn’t. I never had.

Well, maybe that wasn’t the truth. When I was younger, I *did* wonder. I always expected them to turn up at whatever boarding school I’d been shipped off to and take me away for a family vacation, the way all my classmates’ families did. But then I’d sit there alone during the holidays while everyone else was gone, with only a few remaining teachers and a stacked envelope of money keeping me company. The cash was the only sign they knew I existed, even though now I realized it probably wasn’t sent by them at all, but from someone on their staff. No card. No happy holiday wishes. No acknowledgement at all other than my name in a messy scrawl on the envelope.

Shaking my head, I took in another drag, not sure why my thoughts had veered off in this direction. I’d had an incredible night with someone I’d never expected, and my parents, or lack thereof, had nothing to do with it.

They didn’t deserve to know anything about Gavin or be anywhere near him. He was on such a different level to those assholes, it was a joke.

I tapped my ashes into a glass tray nearby as my stomach dipped.

I didn’t regret what had happened last night, not even a little bit. But if I were honest with myself, I knew better than to mess with Gavin. It was why I’d pushed him away. For his own damn good. But he was just as stubborn an ass as me, and he’d refused to let me go.

Did that make me weak for giving in? Knowing I wasn’t the right person for him? Knowing I’d just drag him down with all my baggage and the dark thoughts that kept me up at night? Kept me taking out my bitterness with my fists?

Gavin was light. He was the only one who’d ever made an effort to try to drag me out of my own personal hell, but that wasn’t fair to him. He deserved someone as good as he was.

It was too bad his radar for attracting men was for shit. His dating history proved that. His interest in *me* proved that.

I stabbed out my cigarette and immediately lit up another.

Gavin didn’t smoke. Didn’t have many bad habits that I’d witnessed since I’d known him, other than his penchant for trash reality TV and the fact that he preferred gin over tequila.

He came from a good family, one he actually liked and got along with. Donovan was one of the more levelheaded guys in the group, and I knew for a fact they all spent birthdays and holidays together. Probably did all the family vacation shit, too.

It wasn’t like I’d fit in with all that. And didn’t Gavin deserve someone who would?

Scooting to the edge of the chair, I rubbed at the space between my eyes that was starting to throb.

What the hell was I doing? This thing between me and Gavin could only end one way. He wanted long term, hearts and flowers, and I was not that guy. It was inevitable, really, the end of us. So why had I even started it?

*Oh, I know—I’m a selfish bastard.* I’d promised that I wouldn’t hurt him, but deep down we both knew how things would ultimately go.

I was a perpetual fuck-up. Everyone knew that. A man who only knew one way to solve his problems, and it wasn’t by talking them through. So in what world did I think that I would end up with someone as good and smart as Gavin?

Fucking delusional, that's what I was. I'd taken one look at Gavin last night and my brain short-circuited. The only thought left behind was that I needed to touch him, needed to make him mine.

Well, congratulations to me. I'd done such a great job of claiming him that I couldn't seem to think about anything else.

I shook my head, disgusted with myself all over again. I was so screwed. I could still see Gavin staring up at me, telling me I wasn't a hopeless cause, and for a second there I'd almost believed him—until I realized the reason he'd been in that bed with me last night was because I'd snatched him out of the arms of his date.

Yeah, I was *such* a stand-up guy. But all's fair in lust and war, right? Not my fault Trevor the Tool was exactly that—and now here I was justifying my shitty behavior.

Oh well, it wasn't like Gavin didn't know who he was getting into bed with. I was a selfish prick—everyone knew that. It wasn't like anyone actually *expected* me to do the right thing. So why should I, when everything inside me was screaming to take just a little more? To enjoy Gavin why he still looked at me like I hung the fucking moon?

My phone buzzed in my pocket just in time to stop my spiraling thoughts, and when I pulled it out and saw Gavin's name and a message on my screen, I put my cigarette between my lips and slid it open.

GAVIN:

Lunch will be up any minute now. Unless you're hungry for something else, because that's UP right now.

My dick jerked at the image that brought to mind, and I pictured Gavin as he'd been sprawled out across my bed last night, naked and hard for me.

*Fuck.* I was in way over my head here. I didn't know how to do this back-and-forth shit. How to flirt and be sweet and make him melt into a puddle with some sappy-ass reply.

So why did we bother sending out for food?

GAVIN:

You were hungry.

I had been, but hell, I would've passed on the food for another go around with him. Maybe I hadn't been obvious enough.

For YOU.

Three little dots appeared, then disappeared, then a message with a picture of Gavin lounging in my bed in that red thong came up on the screen.

GAVIN:

Then what the hell am I doing here in your bed alone?

That was a good question. What the hell *was* I doing sitting up here moping when he was down in *our* apartment with nothing but a scrap of red material covering his cock?

Was I selfish? Yes.

Would I end up hurting him? More than likely.

Was that going to stop me from going down there and peeling that ridiculous excuse for underwear off him with my teeth?

Hell fucking no.

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## THIRTY-FOUR

## *gavin*

I FINISHED OFF the last of the fruit plate that had been delivered along with several others Daire and I had demolished like a pack of heathens. But hey, I hadn't worked up an appetite like that in, well, ever.

Daire watched me over the lip of his coffee mug. "Plans today?"

"Nothing set in stone." I licked the juice from the orange slice off my finger. "Why?"

He shrugged. "Just curious."

*Just curious, my ass.* Daire wasn't "just curious" about anything without a motive.

"What about you?" I said.

"Nothing set in stone." When he smirked, I shook my head.

Daire didn't offer himself up to hang out, and after his reaction when I'd brought up having dinner together, the last thing I wanted to do was scare him off. Not after how perfect the last few hours had been.

Perfect, but fragile. I expected this happy bubble to pop any second.

"If I wasn't around," Daire said, his finger making slow circles on the top of his mug, "what would you be doing today?"

Did he *want* to spend more time with me, and this was his way of hinting about it? I had a couple of places I'd wanted to check out this weekend, but they were so not up Daire's alley. He'd probably wrinkle his nose up or laugh, the same as my brother did when I brought up what I collected.

When I didn't answer, still trying to come up with an alternative, Daire said, "Is it a secret, or you just don't wanna tell me?"

Was that a tinge of *hurt* I heard behind his words? Like I was purposely keeping him out of the loop because I didn't think he deserved to know?

After opening up to me about his abandonment, the last thing I wanted to do was make him think he wasn't welcome. Especially when the truth was that I never wanted him to leave my side.

"No, it's nothing like that," I reassured him. "But you can't make fun of me for it."

"Why would I make fun of you?"

"Van thinks it's weird."

"So? Van's weird."

"Well…" I wouldn't argue that. My brother's first date with Kelly had been at a porn shoot, for God's sake. "I like to go to antique shops sometimes."

Daire didn't even blink, just cocked his head to the side.

"I collect compasses," I said quickly before he could respond. "I like vintage ones, the older the better, and I—" I bit down on my lip and shrugged. "They're just my thing."

"Huh." Daire drummed his fingers along the counter and looked at me like he was trying to figure out my life's secrets. "That's not what I thought you were going to say."

The intensity of his stare had me shifting in my seat and second-guessing myself. "The shops give me some ideas for interior design too, like how to incorporate classic styles with the more modern pieces today." I cleared my throat. "But I do other things too. You know, hustle and run at the pool halls."

I expected Daire to laugh at that, but instead he leaned forward, resting his elbows on the counter. "Don't do that. If it's something you like, own it. Who gives a fuck what anyone else thinks?"

Heat crept into my face, not from embarrassment or irritation at his words, but because he was right. Why *did* I care what anyone thought? Everyone collected something, right? Maybe even stranger things than what I did.

"You're right," I said, straightening my shoulders. "My name is Gavin, and I collect old-ass compasses."

*That* had his lips twitching, and he nodded.

"Better."

“Thank you.” What was it about Daire that made me feel stronger and more secure? He could’ve easily made fun of me, but he’d chosen to empower me instead, and he probably didn’t even realize it. He thought he was a bad guy, but he completely blocked out the moments like this when he proved he wasn’t.

“Wanna show me?” he said.

My eyes widened. “Seriously? You’d want to go with me?”

“Yeah.”

My stomach flipped, and I couldn’t help the grin that spread across my face. The fact that he was interested, that he wanted to know more and actually spend time with me, blew my mind. And also showed how little I’d been willing to settle for with the guys from my past.

“Then you’d better put some clothes on, Mr. Connery, or I’m not sure I’ll be able to take you anywhere.”

A HALF-HOUR LATER, Scotty dropped us off at an antique shop on the Upper West Side that was within walking distance of a couple others. I tried to space out my visits so there would be more inventory to sift through, and since it’d been months since I was last here, I was overdue and hoping for a successful haul.

I chanced a look in Daire’s direction, trying not to make it noticeable. He’d been quiet on the ride over, and I had to remind myself that was nothing unusual. Daire wasn’t a chatty kind of guy, but when he’d taken my hand and led me to the back seats of the Sprinter, it helped ease the residual nerves I’d felt at dragging him along.

Daire wanted me close, and that spoke louder than any words he could’ve said.

“You ready?”

He nodded and stepped up to the door, pulling it open for me, and I was so shocked that I just stood there.

“Are you?”

I shook myself out of my daze and tried not to skip over to him, but it was hard with the way my heart had just stuttered several beats. Because who was this guy holding open a *door* for me, and what had he done with Daire?

As I went to walk by, Daire leaned down and said by my ear, “What? Your other dates didn’t open the door for you?”

My feet faltered. “*Dates?*”

“Yeah. That’s what we’re on, isn’t it?”

I hadn’t wanted to call it that in case he freaked out—kind of like I was doing right now—but if *Daire* wanted to call it that, I wouldn’t stop him.

“I, uh…yeah. I guess we are.”

Daire’s lips quirked. “You’re blushing.”

I cursed my pale skin as heat bloomed on my cheeks, then I shoved him in the arm. “You’re not supposed to point that out.”

“Why not? It’s cute.”

What in the *world* was happening right now? I’d thought I was going to have to tiptoe around Daire all day like one would a bear. But instead of dodging angry swings, I found myself wanting to crawl in his lap.

I stepped inside the store, needing to get out of the doorway, and as the door swung shut behind us I heard, “Holy shit.”

“I hope you’re ready to dig.”

Daire stepped up beside me, staring down the first of several narrow rows of floor-to-ceiling shelves. They were jam-packed full of miscellaneous items spanning decades, and only loosely organized. It was overwhelming, to say the least.

“You wanna look through all this? For a *compass*? Could you have picked anything smaller?”

I chuckled and hooked my arm through his. “I’m so tempted to say yes, just to see you sweat, but no. There’s a section where Anita puts anything new that comes in for me to look through.”

Daire swallowed, visibly relieved, as we started down the aisle. “Does that say *doorknobs*?”

I turned to see what he was looking at and spotted several storage containers. “Yep. Depending what decade you’re in, styles changed for things like doors and doorknobs, flooring, trim and molding, corbels—all kinds of things. If someone is looking to do a true restoration, then these are the places they come to find year-specific pieces.”

“Corbels? What the hell is that?”

“Oh, uh, you know the fancy decorative supports that jut out from the wall under balconies or overhangs. They’re there to support extra weight, but sometimes they flank a door— Aaand I’ve lost you.”

Daire nodded. “Yeah, you lost me the second you said ‘fancy.’”

I snorted and tugged him around a corner into another row that was full of doors all lined up against each other.

“Damn. They really pack a lot of sh—stuff in here, don’t they?”

“They sure do. You know the saying, one man’s trash is another man’s treasure.”

Daire’s eyes found mine and I was shocked to see that familiar guarded look back in his.

“That what you do, collect things others have tossed aside?”

I knew what he was getting at, could see the fear of rejection in his eyes. A longtime response to years of being treated a certain way. But I wouldn’t let any doubt slip in between us.

“No.” I smiled up at him. “I find the gems that people are too stupid to know they had.”

“Don’t think I’ve ever been called a gem.”

Feeling brave, I pressed a kiss to his cheek. “Rough like a diamond.”

I was about to step back when Daire snaked his arm around my waist and crushed his lips onto mine. The kiss erased all the tension that had crept in, reigniting the spark we’d let flicker on low while we stepped out of our little bubble and entered the real world.

“Sorry.”

I hadn’t needed an apology, and certainly hadn’t expected it. But that Daire wanted to give it meant the world to me.

“We’re good. I promise.”

He nodded, and I gestured to a small room at the far end of the row.

“Come on, it’s just over here.” I led him inside the room where several glass displays were kept. They housed some of the more delicate and expensive items the store had for sale, including jewelry, watches, and compasses.

I stopped in front of the display, peering through the glass top to see if there was anything new that caught my eye.

“Jesus. Does that say fifteen hundred dollars?”

I glanced at the brass aeronautical compass he was looking at. “Yeah, it’s signed by Henry Browne & Son Sestrel, circa 1930s. That’s a good find. They made beautiful binnacles and compasses.”

“What the hell is a…binna—”

“Binnacle? It’s like, hmm, a little house for a compass on a boat.”

Daire’s eyes narrowed. “Are you dumbing this shit down for me?”

“Maybe a little?”

“Appreciate that, but my knowledge of a compass ends at north, south, and our two dumbass friends.”

I laughed as I pictured East and West giving him the stink-eye. “I’m kind of a nerd about this stuff.”

“Nah, just passionate. What got you into it?”

My heart flipped at the more personal question. Small talk was not Daire’s forte. But he was trying *and* succeeding with me today. I’d never felt more *heard* on a date then I did right now.

I couldn’t remember Joey ever asking why I collected compasses.

“My mom.” I smiled fondly, thinking of her sparkling hazel eyes and long blond hair. To the outside world, Kimberly Thompson was one of the most beautiful women to ever be photographed, a supermodel who’d graced the cover of nearly every fashion magazine around, and was an instantly recognizable face, but to me she was just Mom.

“When she started modeling and traveling a lot, she gave me her father’s old compass. Something to always make me think of her. It was a family heirloom, one that had been passed down for years, and I’ve been hooked ever since.”

I could feel Daire’s eyes on me, but when he didn’t respond, I thought that maybe I’d said too much.

“I’m sorry—”

“What for?”

I turned to see his eyes searching my face, confusion furrowing his brow. “I…I didn’t mean to tell you my whole life story. Probably should’ve just stopped at ‘my mom gave it to me.’”

Daire took a step closer and reached for the hand I had resting on the glass case. “Why would you say that? I asked you a question. You answered. And your answer, by the way, was beautiful.”

Had he not been standing in front of me, I never would’ve believed that such words had just been spoken by Daire. I’d always suspected there were emotions behind that tough-guy persona, a softer side, that he wanted someone to *see* him. I just never expected that someone would be me.

I felt as though I was getting a glimpse behind the curtain in the Emerald City—only I wasn’t disappointed in what I found.

“Thank you. It means a lot to me.”

He looked back to the glass case and pointed inside. “There any in here you like the look of?”

I screwed my nose up and sighed, disappointed at the sparse selection. “No. I’ve been searching for something super specific. It’s a rare silver pocket sundial and compass by Michael Butterfield, Paris, circa 1700, and I swear every time I’m close to finding one, it gets snatched right out of my hands.”

“You do know there’s this invention called the internet, right? I hear you can find just about anything.”

I rolled my eyes. “But that’s…I don’t know, cheating. I want to find it the old-fashioned way.”

“By rummaging through antique stores and coming up with jack shit?”

“By persevering and getting immense pleasure *when* I finally discover the elusive thing.”

“Right.” Daire leaned back on the case. “I’ll take your word for it.”

With a final sigh, I leaned into his side and rested my hands on his shoulder, staring up at him. “Wanna get out of here?”

Daire turned and grazed his lips over mine. “You sure? We can look some more. I thought you said there were others you wanted to stop by.”

Damn, I was in so much trouble. I’d already been crushing on Daire when he was all grumpy and scowl-tastic, but this new side had a whole lot more than casual hookup emotions surfacing. The fact that he was willing to spend some time doing something *I* cared about gave me a strange feeling of rightness that I couldn’t explain.

“I’ll make you a deal.” I reached for his hand, wondering if he’d pull away, but as with everything else today, he didn’t disappoint. In fact, Daire laced his fingers though mine.

“What’s that?”

“We go find a bakery and grab a coffee and some yummy pastry to eat. Then I drag you around at least five more stores.”

“Digging for your elusive compass?”

I beamed up at him, not able to remember a time I’d ever felt so happy. “Of course.”

“Deal, but it better be a big fuckin’ pastry.”

“The biggest.”

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## THIRTY-FIVE

## *daire*

“WEST JUST SENT us a few texts.” Gavin rubbed a towel over his wet hair as he walked out of his room later that night, chuckling at whatever was on his phone.

Fresh from his shower, probably to get off all the dust from those antique shops, he looked relaxed and sexy in a t-shirt and loose jeans that hung off his hips.

“Yeah?” I said absently as my gaze trailed over him. I’d heard the alert of our group message thread on my phone, but I’d ignored it. Why did I give a shit what they wanted when this was my view tonight?

Gavin dropped onto the couch beside me and curled his legs underneath him. “It started with ‘Where the hell are you two? You’re not answering’ and has now progressed to ‘I swear to God if we have to break into your apartment to see you two have axed each other to pieces, I’ll make sure you both have dicks tattooed on your remaining body parts.’” Gavin looked up and grinned. “Isn’t that nice?”

“Or disturbing.”

“Which means you approve?”

“Of them breaking in? Hell no. Text him back and tell him to fuck off.”

“Then they’ll know we’re together.” Gavin went suddenly still and then started to backtrack. “I mean, not, like, *together* together, just in the same room—”

“Gavin?” He snapped his mouth shut, and I grabbed his phone and tossed it to the other side of the couch. “You think I give a shit if they know? Come on now.”

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, it occurred to me that maybe he was the one who didn't want that info out there. But the second a shy smile curved his lips, I knew that wasn't the case.

"Yeah?" He picked at the frayed hem of my jeans, and I put my hand over his, recognizing the nervous habit.

"Yeah," I said. "But on second thought, text his ass back so he doesn't come over."

Gavin laughed and snatched up his phone, keeping his other hand beneath mine. He shot off a text and then angled his body to face me.

"I take it you don't want to go out tonight?" he said.

"Not with them."

"Oh yeah? What did you have in mind instead?"

Even being shit at flirting or dating, I could tell what he was thinking about, and I was definitely on board—but later.

"Something I don't think you'll be excited about."

"That doesn't sound promising." Gavin tilted his head to the side, studying my face. "You're going to fight? Is that it?"

No point in hiding it. I nodded.

"Really? You don't wanna burn off calories in a different way?" He gave a flirty smile, and had I not already promised a couple rounds tonight, I would've said fuck it and stripped Gavin naked.

"Kinda tied in tonight."

He nodded slowly. "And is this something you…*like* to do?"

"Meaning?"

"You're not being forced to go fight or anything, right? Like, you do it 'cause you want to?"

I almost snorted, but Gavin was serious. "I don't do it for anyone but myself. Do I make people a lot of money? Sure. But it's on my terms."

"But aren't you worried you'll get hurt?"

"No."

"But…" He tugged his lower lip between his teeth. "What if *I'm* worried?"

"You shouldn't be. I don't lose."

"Ever?"

"Nope."

"But I saw the bruises on you the night I followed you. They looked bad, D. Someone landed a few hits on you."

“’Cause I let him. Same with Joey. I let him get in one good punch before I laid in on him.”

Gavin visibly cringed at the mention of his asshole ex. “He deserved it. You didn’t.”

“Finally admitting that now?”

“Maybe.”

“I wasn’t going to let him fuck around with you. And I’m still not sorry.”

“I’m not either.” He swallowed and moved his fingers to trace over my knuckles. “Can I ask…why? All these fights… Why do you do it?”

I’d never given a lot of thought to that. Fighting always felt like something I had to do if I didn’t want to end up in jail from knocking random assholes out on the street. I was sure there was a therapist out there who’d wanna diagnose the nitty-gritty of why, all my abandonment and rage, blah blah fuckin’ blah. It didn’t matter.

“I need to,” I said.

“Okay.” He seemed content with that answer, at least for now. “Why underground?”

I shrugged. “No rules?”

“And more money? Nah. I bet you could make a killing doing it professionally. Ever thought about that?”

“Nope.”

He seemed amused by my clipped answers and tapped his lips. “Have you even given a thought to what you’d like to do after college? I don’t even know your major.”

“No clue, and my major is whatever my advisor put down.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. I’ll end up where I need to.”

“Just go with the flow with no plan, huh?” Gavin shook his head. “We’re gonna have to circle back to that one when you’re not about to go pummel a few people to death.”

My lips quirked. “I never let it get that far. Too much mess.”

“Oh God. I can’t tell if you’re joking or not.”

“Joke? What’s that?”

Gavin shoved me in the arm, and I grabbed his wrist and yanked him on top of me.

“I’m being serious,” he said, positioning himself so his legs flanked my hips. “You should think about it.”

“You think I can think about *anything* while you’re grinding your dick against mine?”

“You’re the one that pulled me over here.”

“Ah, my mistake—get off.”

Gavin looped his arms around my neck and batted his lashes. “I thought you didn’t want me to grind my dick all over you.”

“The fuck you get that idea from? I said I couldn’t think when you did. *But* now that you’ve stopped, I remember I gotta go.”

Gavin reluctantly climbed off me, and as I got to my feet, he announced, “I’m coming with you.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m going to grab my jacket and come with you.”

He went to walk by me, and I took hold of his arm. My heart thumped wildly at the thought of him anywhere near the assholes I’d be going up against tonight.

“You’re not coming with me.”

“Yes. I am.”

“No, you’re fucking not.”

Gavin gently pulled his arm out my grip. “You can’t tell me what to do.”

“Watch me.”

I turned on my heel, about to head for the door without him, but Gavin followed close behind.

“Thought you were getting your jacket.”

“Giving you a chance to ditch me? Psh. How stupid do you think I am?”

I opened my mouth to respond, and he quickly shoved a finger up against my lips.

“I can either walk through the tunnels with you and show up at the fight by your side, or I can sneak down there alone and—”

“Okay, you fucking win.” Because there was no way I would let him go trekking down there again, alone, in the dark. And he would, too, the stubborn little shit.

Gavin grinned, pleased with himself for winning this round, but I had some stipulations if he planned to be a reckless fool.

“You can’t go down there looking like that.”

Gavin glanced down at his t-shirt and jeans that barely clung to his hips and shrugged. “I told you I would get a jacket—”

“It’s not just that.” I frowned. “It’s everything. Your hair, that face… Jesus, it’s like you’re a beacon of holy light or some shit. Those heathens will sniff you out in a second.”

Gavin pouted, and fuck, if there hadn’t been money riding on tonight, I would’ve taken him right then on the closest flat surface and showed him what a heathen *I* could be. “Well, I can’t really change my face.”

“Thank God for that. All I’m sayin’ is”—I grabbed my leather jacket off the coat rack and then snatched up the ball cap I’d tossed on the entry table the other day—“you gotta hide all that pretty. It’s distracting.”

Gavin’s pout turned to a grin as he pulled the cap on and slid his arms into the jacket. “Better?”

“It’ll have to do.”

I shook my head and pulled open our front door, and when we stopped by the elevator and Gavin sniffed the collar of the jacket and moaned that it smelled like me, I wanted to kick myself in the ass.

Tonight was going to be a *long* fucking night.

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# THIRTY-SIX

## *gavin*

HEADING DOWN THROUGH the tunnels this time was an entirely different experience. For one, Daire was holding my hand, something I wouldn't have thought possible a couple of days ago. But his fingers were linked through mine, holding onto me with a firm, strong grasp as he led the way.

Now that we were down here, I realized what a monumentally stupid idea this had been. Upstairs I'd only wanted to be with him, to make sure he was okay, but the closer we got to the fight, the more I wondered if my presence would only distract him. What if the others in the crowd tried to mess with me again? I'd conveniently forgotten that part, that Daire had stopped his fight to get me out of there.

No wonder he'd been so adamant about my throwing on his hat and jacket so I'd blend in more. I hoped it worked. I needed to keep my head down and try not to draw attention, because that was the last thing Daire needed.

I could hear the shouts echoing down the tunnel as we got closer, and Daire tightened his fingers around mine. If I didn't know better, I would've thought he was anxious.

"Stay close to me," he said, keeping his voice low. "During the fight, don't move from where I put you. Got it?"

"Promise."

Daire stopped abruptly to face me then gripped my chin as he pulled me in for a kiss I felt *everywhere*, but before I could reach for him, he turned away and we were on the move again.

As we approached the opening in the wall that led into the makeshift ring, Daire gestured for me to go first and followed close behind.

*Oh shit.* The crowd was even bigger tonight, their shouts deafening as they urged on the two fighting in the center. I couldn't see much, but I definitely caught the spray of blood that spattered those standing closest when one of the guys took a direct hit to the jaw.

My stomach plummeted at the sight, but beside me, Daire was almost… smiling? Not with teeth or anything, but his lips were definitely curved upward, and his excitement shone through his eyes.

Of course it couldn't be anything as simple as compass hunting that he enjoyed; Daire got off on a good punch to the face.

"Stop stressing," he said by my ear, never taking his eyes off the match. "Try to enjoy it."

Enjoy worrying that someone would accidentally knock some of his teeth out? Sure. No problem. Easy.

He was fucking insane.

A couple more hits and one of the fighters went down, to the disappointment of half the crowd and the thrill of the other. The host, the same guy as last time, jumped up on the boulder to announce the winner, then his gaze traveled across the crowd and stopped on Daire.

The way his whole face lit up when he saw him was wild, and then he pointed at Daire and called out to the crowd, "Looks like there's a Reaper in the house."

As all eyes turned in our direction, I was suddenly grateful for the hat sitting low on my brow. The attention was brutal, but Daire only straightened, throwing his shoulders back and kicking up his chin in acknowledgment.

The response from the crowd was instantaneous. A thunderous roar of excitement filled the cavernous space, as though a superstar had just stepped into their mix—and in a way, I guess he had. From his own account, Daire never lost a match, he was just that good, and to those in the audience who'd placed bets he'd show up tonight, that meant a good payday was on the way.

"Okay, okay, you wanna keep making noise or get back to fightin'?" the host shouted, his eyes remaining on the two of us as the crowd quieted. "That's what I thought. So, who out there thinks he's tough enough to take down the Reaper?"

My gut clenched at the idea that someone was about to pulverize Daire, and at the same time I was trying to remember if our first-aid kit was stocked.

"*This* is the Reaper?" A big, burly guy with a neck as thick as a tree trunk stepped forward.

"That a challenger I hear?" the host called out from behind the big ox's back.

"Let's *go*," he shouted, then balled his fists together in front of himself with a grunt that made the veins in his neck pulse—very reminiscent of the Hulk.

I snuck a peak at Daire, who wore a look that said, *Are you kidding with this lame-ass?* and his lack of fear made mine dissipate…a little bit.

"Gather 'round, gather 'round. Fighters, move into position."

My heart raced as Daire gestured for me to come with him, and I followed him around the back of the group and to where the host stood. He stopped beside a tall, tatted-up guy with piercings all over his face.

"You," he said, and then gestured to me. "Watch him. Anyone touches him, I'll rip your piercings out one by one and make you swallow 'em."

My eyes widened at the threat, but the guy seemed to take it in stride as Daire turned back to me and said, "Don't move from this fucking spot. You hear me?"

I nodded, perfectly happy to stay by Mr. Tall, Tatted, and Pierced. Especially since he now had an incentive to keep me safe.

Daire was about to turn away when I grabbed his arm. "Uh…good luck?"

I had no idea if that was the right thing to say to someone who was about to beat a man to a pulp. But Daire's dangerous smirk told me I was spot-on.

"Thanks." He winked, then turned back to the eager crowd, approaching the fight circle like a predator on the hunt. He was slow and methodical, analyzing his surroundings and sizing up his opponent. Then he stopped by the host and gave a clipped nod.

"Right. If you haven't already, it's time to place those bets. Reaper or…" He looked to Daire's opponent, who barked, "Gunner."

Whispers rolled through the hyped-up onlookers as everyone argued why their guy would win, but really, would anyone be dumb enough to bet against someone called the Reaper?

With the bets placed, the crowd gathered in a little tighter, the air thickening with tension as Daire moved to one side of the makeshift ring and Gunner the other.

I shuffled forward, but my guard dog put a hand on my shoulder and shook his head—and okay, fair enough, I didn't really want to see him get his piercings ripped out either.

Then he cocked his head to a spot beside him where there were a couple of broken slabs of concrete. I climbed up on them and immediately had a better view. Something I was thankful for when Daire pulled his shirt off over his head.

Damn, but he was sexy. With the spotlight shining over the circle, Daire's ripped body and sharply cut muscles beckoned me closer, making me want to run my tongue all over him.

I could see the veins in his strong arms, and remembered kissing my way across his built chest—and despite the fact I was standing in some underground tunnel, about to watch that beautiful body potentially get damaged, my dick stood up tall like it wanted to wish him luck too.

"Okay, everyone, you know the rules. There aren't any. Just no weapons, and don't fucking kill each other. First one to knock out or get the other to concede wins."

*Oh God.* I wasn't sure if I wanted to watch this or cover my eyes, but as Daire began to move into the circle, I found myself unable to look away.

Like a big cat, Daire moved with stealth and precision. Each step he took was calculated, every decision thought through, as he began to drive his opponent around the circle until Gunner was facing me and I was no longer a distraction for him.

He'd done it on purpose, I knew, probably as much for me as himself, because if Daire played this the usual way, he was going to let that asshole make the first move. Something I *really* didn't want to see head-on.

There was no buzzer or anyone yelling for them to start the match. It was Gunner who lunged first, faking like he was going to throw a punch. Daire didn't fall for it, didn't even move out of the way, and instead dropped to land a hit to the guy's ribs.

Gunner howled, in pain or annoyance, I wasn't sure, but it caused him to lash out, his beefy arm swinging in an arc that missed entirely as Daire ducked out of the way. His massive size had him moving too slow for how quick my guy was.

*My guy… Was* he mine? It sure as hell felt like it. Only time would tell if we decided to keep each other around, but for now, all I could do was stare in awe as he twisted around behind Gunner, landing blow after blow to his back.

The second Gunner turned around, Daire knocked him in the jaw so hard Gunner's head flew back. He stumbled and tried to shake off the hit, and to my surprise, Daire didn't take advantage. No doubt he could've kept going and won the match in a matter of seconds, but he hung back, bouncing on his toes as he waited for Gunner's next move.

Oh, I recognized that plan instantly—the lion teasing its prey, wanting to play with it before digging his claws in.

To Daire's utter disappointment—it was written all over his face—Gunner didn't last another punch to the eye before he tapped out. Proof that size and lifting heavy at the gym didn't equal kicking ass in the ring.

Daire looked up at the host and made a circle with his finger, indicating he wanted to go again.

"Do we have another? You think *you* can take on the Reaper?" the host shouted.

With his hands low on his hips, Daire looked out over the crowd slowly, meeting their eyes one by one as if to taunt them into challenging him.

When his gaze reached me, he gave me a quick once-over, like he was checking to make sure I was still in one piece. Satisfied, he nodded once and gave me a wink.

"And we have a challenger." The host pointed at a guy stepping into the circle who was the same height as Daire but a little leaner. "What's your name?"

The guy only glared up at the host, refusing to answer, and the man standing on the boulder shrugged.

"All right, place your bets. The Reaper or…Anonymous."

A heartbeat later, the challenger kicked out at Daire, hoping to catch him off guard. Had Daire not been watching him intently already, he would've taken that blow directly to the head. Instead, he caught the guy's leg and hauled him in close, lifting his knee to strike him in the stomach.

Anonymous clearly felt the blow but was able to pull away and shake it off much quicker than the first opponent. He threw a punch toward Daire, who managed to avoid it.

Damn, he was fast. He seemed to not only be able to move quickly when he needed to, but it was like he was able to anticipate their moves.

It was mesmerizing to watch now that my anxiety had been tamped down. I could focus on and appreciate how fucking incredible he was—the pure strength of his muscles, how his back flexed with every punch he threw, every move he made. It was so hot my dick took notice, a reaction completely at odds with the last time I was here.

As the two of them went at it with quick jabs and kicks, I felt the nervous energy in my stomach turn into something more…primal. Daire was clearly having the time of his life doing something he enjoyed, and he was a badass. The moves seemed to come so naturally to him, the same way they did in the bedroom, and suddenly this match was going on too damn long.

I turned my head, nuzzling into his jacket so that his heady scent filled my lungs every time I breathed, while below my hips, my cock had a mind of its own.

Never in a million years had I thought watching Daire beat the crap out of someone would turn me on, but add that to the list of surprises over the last couple of weeks.

A blink-and-you-missed-it sweep of his opponent's legs and Daire had him on the ground in a complicated hold that had the guy's face turning purple. He held out for longer than I expected, but then tapped the ground, and Daire immediately released him.

"Reaper for the second win tonight," the host shouted, but his words were a distant echo as Daire's eyes landed on mine.

His nostrils flared like he sensed the desire that was coming off me in waves, and he didn't hesitate, nor did he look away, as he headed straight for me. He made a cutting motion across his neck, signaling to the host he was done. After snatching up his winnings, Daire reached for me, turned me around and directed me toward the exit.

The crowd dispersed, and as we disappeared out of the spotlight and into the shadowed maze that would lead us back to the main tunnel, the rowdy chants began to fade.

My breathing was coming faster now, my cock pounding almost as hard as my heart as Daire closed in on me. His hands found me first, gripping my waist and pulling me to a stop, and when he grinded his stiff dick against my ass, I reached for his hands.

“On me,” I panted as I pulled them around to the zipper of my jeans. “I need to feel them on me.”

“Then you need to hurry the fuck up and get moving.”

I shook my head. “No. Here.”

“What?”

I drew my zipper down. What had he called me? A beacon of holy light?

I wasn’t feeling so holy right now.

“I want you to fuck me right here. Right now.”

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# THIRTY-SEVEN

## *daire*

JESUS CHRIST. I hadn't expected *Gavin* to be the one to knock me on my ass tonight, but wanting me to fuck him down here, where anyone could walk by?

He was out of his mind.

Lucky for him, I was too.

Before I could say another word, his jeans were unzipped, even though they were so loose that a rough tug would've worked just as well. They dropped to the ground by his feet, and when those perfect ass cheeks came into view, thanks to a purple thong, I moved in closer behind him to shield him.

"Fuckin' hell, Gavin. You tryin' to kill me?"

"Not until I get what I want."

I groaned, but it was a long, drawn-out sound. This was a bad idea, having my back vulnerable if anyone got close, but there was no way I would turn Gavin around to have him naked for some fucker to drool over.

"We have to make this quick," I said, all the adrenaline from my fights still coursing through my veins, combined with the hunger only he seemed to draw out of me. Grinding my dick over the crease of his ass, I reached for my wallet, only to realize I hadn't brought it with me. "Shit."

"What?" Gavin pushed back against me, impatient.

"I don't have a condom."

"Back pocket of my jeans."

I knelt, drawing that sexy thong down to his ankles as I went, and came away with not one, but two packets from his jeans. Shoving one in my own

pocket, I stood up and tore the other open with my teeth.

“Aren’t you a prepared boy scout?” I said as I unzipped my jeans and shoved my briefs down below my rock-hard cock and then rolled the lubed condom on in record time. “Am I fulfilling a fantasy right now?”

“You have no idea.” Gavin reached up to grip the back of my neck and hauled me in for a scorching kiss that was anything but shy. He was a man taking what he wanted, and I thanked the stars what he wanted right now was me.

“Turn around and get rid of the hat. I want to see your face when you take my cock.”

Gavin didn’t hesitate, tossing the cap aside as he kicked out of his jeans and that miniscule excuse for underwear. He turned, and then I backed him up the couple steps needed to get him well into the shadows. When his back met the crumbling stone behind him, I reached for his waist and said against his lips, “Hold on.”

He wrapped his arms around my neck, and when I hoisted him up my body, he eagerly wound his legs around my waist.

He was light as a fucking feather, so it hardly required any effort to get Gavin high enough that I could stroke my dick under his balls to bump up against his spread hole. When the head of my cock nudged at the tight little entrance, Gavin’s thighs tensed.

My eyes locked on his fevered ones as I braced a hand on the wall to steady myself. The last thing I wanted to do was drop him, and for this to work, he was going to have to seat himself.

With my legs stable, and my arm holding him in place, I reached down with the other and positioned myself for him to—

“Oh, *fuck* yesss.”

—slide down onto me.

As Gavin’s ass enveloped me one torturous inch at a time, I could feel my knees buckling. The intense pleasure of burying myself in such a hot hole was almost more than I could take. But I’d be damned if I tapped out now.

I had the sexiest guy in the world impaling himself on my dick and about to use it to get off. There was no way I was going to pass out before *that* happened.

“Daire…” Gavin dug his heels into my ass and began to squirm. “I need you to move, like, now.”

Chalk that up to another thing I was starting to really like about Gavin—he was a bossy goddamn bottom, one who had no trouble telling me what he wanted or needed, and that was sexy as fuck.

I sucked a path up his neck to his ear, then dug my fingers into his waist, pulled my hips back, and then drove my shaft in as deep as I could get.

"Yesss. Just like that," he said, loud enough that I would've put a hand over his mouth if both weren't already busy.

Then again, there were better ways to shut him up.

I stole his mouth with a kiss as I thrust up into him, swallowing his moans as my cock burrowed deep inside.

I thought nothing was as good as the high I got after winning a match, but being inside Gavin was my new addiction. His tight ass choked my dick, driving me out of my mind, as our tongues tangled.

The danger of being caught only added to the adrenaline pumping through my body. It was stupid to be doing this here, I knew that, but there'd been no way I was walking away from a desperate and horny Gavin.

Something I was thankful for now as he slid his hands up the back of my neck and gripped my hair, adding a bite of pain to go with the brain-destroying pleasure he was giving.

"So hot," he groaned, his hips moving faster. "So damn sexy…"

He blinked down at me, his eyes like twin storm clouds.

"I never knew how turned on I'd get watching you fight like that."

Oh hell, so *that* was what had gotten him all hot and hard. Watching me beat the shit out of the guys back there.

"Your body, it's so"—he pushed up, sliding up my throbbing prick—"*hard*."

No shit. I was so hard I could drill through the stone wall behind him. But for now, I was busy working on him.

"And all this sweat and muscle." Gavin lowered his head and licked a path up my cheek. "I want to taste it as you fucking rail me."

"*Christ*." I slammed my mouth down over his, knowing that if he said much more, I'd blow. Then I grabbed hold of his hips and gave him exactly what he'd asked for.

It was a good thing he was wearing my jacket, because I wasn't taking it easy on him as I, in his words, fucking *railed* him.

The sound of voices broke through my haze of lust, and I ripped my mouth away from Gavin's as I looked over my shoulder.

Sure enough, two fuckers had left the fight and stumbled onto us, something apparently even the shadows couldn't hide. Open-mouthed stares had me angling Gavin so they didn't see a thing but my bare ass as I kept up a rhythm not even an audience could stop.

A snarl tore out of me, and their eyes widened, but they didn't move until I said, "Get. The fuck. Out."

My words had the desired effect, though my performance inside the ring probably had more to do with it, and they tripped over themselves in an effort to leave.

"Daire…"

"Right here."

With the Peeping Toms gone, I refocused on Gavin, whose sexy smirk told me he wasn't as pissed off about being seen as I was.

"Growly, protective Daire. So hot," he panted as I drove into him so hard his head fell back against the wall. "And mine."

Fuck, that shouldn't have been what set me off, but hearing Gavin lay claim to me made me unable to stop the inevitable. Every part of me wanted to claim him right back, but my words got lost as my climax raced down my spine.

"Shit." I couldn't stop it, and my thrusts became frantic as I aimed for the sensitive spot inside Gavin that would make him fall apart with me.

"I want it," he said, tightening his fingers in my hair. "Give it to me."

As my cock hit home, he sucked in a breath and buried his mouth in my shoulder to muffle his cries as his release exploded between us. That was all it took to have me coming so deep and hard into his ass that I was glad there was a wall at his back to help hold him up, because the force of his orgasm had him collapsing in my arms.

"Damn." It was the only word I could think of as I pulled out of Gavin, and his legs slowly slid back down so he was standing.

"Not sure I won't fall on my ass after that."

I tied off the condom and tossed it aside, then quickly stuffed myself back into my jeans as Gavin pulled his on and shoved the purple thong into his pocket.

"If you aren't gonna wear that, hand it over."

Gavin frowned, but pulled out the purple scrap of material and handed it to me. I used it to wipe his cum off my stomach.

“Hmm, I was gonna give these back, but on second thought…” I brought them to my nose and inhaled before shoving them in *my* back pocket.

Gavin moaned but quickly jammed the cap back on his head. “Please tell me you’re done here for the night.”

“With the fight, yes. With you, not even close.”

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## THIRTY-EIGHT

*gavin*

I WOKE UP in Daire's bed again the next morning. Technically, it was closing in on noon, but the last couple of nights we hadn't gotten much sleep when we were tangled up in each other.

I was *not* complaining, but as I rolled over in his bed to reach for him, all I found were empty sheets.

Well, that wasn't promising.

Rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I sat up and looked toward the open door of the bathroom, figuring he'd taken a shower, but the lights were off. The bedroom door was closed too, but I could hear movement somewhere in the apartment.

I reached for the pajama pants I'd thrown on the floor in the early-morning hours, and as I bent over, I could feel every aching muscle in my body—including ones I didn't know I had.

This weekend had been the best of my life, but apparently it wasn't without a price. I didn't care; I would gladly pay it a million times over to be with the brooding bad boy who wasn't all that he seemed.

Besides, it was my own damn fault I didn't spend enough hours in the gym building up my leg muscles so I could ride him like a bucking bronco.

I'd have to work on that. Preferably with him, not in the gym.

I ran a hand over my hair and checked that I wasn't too much of a hot mess before wandering out to see what Daire was up to.

The smell of coffee filled my nostrils, but it was the view in front of me that had me stopping in my tracks.

Daire leaned against the kitchen island, fully dressed and gorgeous, casually sipping on his coffee. Had he been alone, I might've said or done something a little indecent, but the blond guy sitting on a stool chatting it up —in a conversation that was no doubt one-sided—had me rethinking that plan.

My brother glanced over his shoulder at me, then did a double take. His eyes widened as he looked at what little I was wearing…and whose bedroom I'd just walked out of.

"What the…" As if to check he wasn't hallucinating, Donovan swiveled his head toward my closed bedroom door and back to Daire's before pinning me with an incredulous look. "No fucking way."

Behind his mug, I swore I saw Daire crack a hint of a smile, and I grinned at my brother as I went to join them. Like yesterday, Daire had had several platters of food brought up, more of a brunch spread this time, and the smell of maple syrup had my stomach growling.

"Morning," I said, not sure who I should go over to first. But when Daire met my gaze, winked, and turned away to make another coffee, I had my answer. "What brings you by, Van?"

"Did you just…come out of Daire's room?"

I glanced behind me at the door I'd left open, the rumpled sheets in clear view. "Looks like it."

"He also came *in* it too," Daire said.

My brother gaped like a fish. "But…" he sputtered. "I thought you two weren't even talking. Not after—"

"I fucked him in the Sprinter?" Daire said, smirking as the espresso began to pour into a mug.

"Oh my God." Donovan rubbed his temples, closing his eyes. Like he could block out what he'd just seen and heard. "You've got to be kidding me."

"There a problem?" I moved to the spot Daire had been, grabbing one of the empty plates he'd set out and piling on the food.

Donovan stared as I took at least one of everything, like he couldn't imagine why I wasn't drinking a green juice, but weekends were for splurging, especially after the amount of calories I'd burned.

I smiled sweetly at my brother before taking a bite of the drenched-in-syrup waffle. Heaven. Pure heaven.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Daire open the fridge and pour a little milk into the mug, and I frowned. That wasn't how he took his coffee. I'd watched him enough to know.

As he stirred, Daire moved in beside me and then slid the perfectly-made-just-the-way-I-like-it coffee my way.

I almost choked on my food at the unexpected gesture that touched me in a way I couldn't explain. It was so simple, but it said so much. He'd watched me the way I'd watched him. Knew my likes, my habits…how I took my coffee.

Daire didn't go out of his way for anyone, hadn't in all the years I'd known him. This was different. This was him making an effort.

My heart squeezed as I smiled up at him, and then I lifted up onto my toes to press a kiss to his lips. If he was surprised, he didn't show it. He kissed me back, curling an arm around my waist. It felt so good, so natural, that I sank into him, and it wasn't until Donovan cleared his throat to remind us he was there that I pulled away.

"Thank you," I said against Daire's lips, and then I picked up the mug and took a long, appreciative swallow.

*Perfect.*

"Okay, one of you needs to start talking," Donovan said, staring between the two of us. "Are you actually dating? Is that what's happening here?"

I wasn't sure how to answer that, because hell if I knew—though if it were up to me, I knew what my response would be.

So when Daire shrugged and said, "Yep," I stopped breathing.

From the looks of it, so had Donovan.

Daire's hand brushed against my lower back. "Aren't you going to be late?" he said, looking pointedly at my brother.

"What?" Donovan shook his head and checked his watch. "Oh. Right. Yeah, I need to get going soon."

"Working today?" I finished off my waffle and moved on to the fluffy scrambled eggs.

"Yeah, I've got a shoot in Williamsburg, and I thought you might wanna come." He glanced between us. "I mean, if you're not busy. I just figured it'd be good to catch up, and there's a flea market nearby you'd like."

My brows shot up at the invitation. I couldn't remember the last time we'd hung out, just the two of us, and I had to admit, it wasn't a bad idea

after several awkward, kinda tense months. It was thoughtful of him to ask, especially with the market incentive for when he was shooting.

"That would be great, actually," I said, and glanced at Daire. "Is that cool with you?"

He nodded, and the hand he had on my back dipped down into the waist of my pants. "Long as I get you later."

Butterflies burst in my stomach, and not even Donovan's "ew" could tame them.

I grabbed a scone and threw it at Donovan's head, but he ducked just in time, or there would've been blueberries and crumbs all over that model face.

He stood up and checked his watch again. "You've got ten minutes, so scarf it and get dressed."

"Want me to meet you downstairs?" I said.

"No." Donovan's eyes narrowed slightly on Daire. "I wanna talk to this one. Alone."

THE DRIVE TO Brooklyn was surprisingly quick, and I barely got a chance to grill Donovan about what he said to Daire before we arrived. I followed him into the hair and makeup trailer, swiping us a couple of drinks at the craft services table on the way. Several stations were already set up in front of blindingly bright mirrors and what seemed like every hair tool and makeup palette known to man. Donovan, of course, just *had* to be the first one there, and he chose the seat in the far back that had a bench for me so we could talk and I'd be out of the stylist's way.

"So you didn't threaten Daire's life, is that what you're telling me?" I handed Donovan a water and then popped the top of my ice-cold soda.

"Could *anybody* do that? I don't have a death wish." Donovan took a long swallow of his drink and then capped the top. "Now, that's not to say I wouldn't do some serious damage in other ways if he's fucking around with you."

I smirked. "I thought we already established he is?"

"Oh for the love of—" Donovan squeezed the bridge of his nose. "This is payback, isn't it?"

"No. Payback would be you having to watch."

I wasn't sure if it was the lighting or what, but Donovan turned visibly green.

“Shit, I’m sorry.” He blew out a breath. “I swear to God, if I could turn back time, I would’ve just told you so you didn’t have to see all that.”

And by *that*, he meant the porn scenes he’d secretly shot with Kelly that all our friends had watched in our apartment one day. No one had caught on because he was always in a mask, but there was a distinguishable birthmark I’d seen that day…

I shuddered, not wanting to relive *that* particular memory. I’d lost my shit on Donovan about it, because hello, how could I not want to stab my eyeballs out after that?

“And,” Donovan continued, “I’m also sorry that you felt you needed to move out. That was never my intention.”

“You thought we’d all be happy roomies after that? When we shared a wall and not even noise-canceling headphones could block you two out?”

Donovan had the sense to at least look apologetic. But hell, it wasn’t his fault his romantic life had been thriving when my own had been in the shitter.

“Look, it wasn’t all your fault,” I said. “Things weren’t good with Joey back then, and maybe I was a little…”

“Jealous?”

“Resentful.” I twisted the tab of my soda back and forth until it snapped off. “It’s not like I didn’t want you to be happy. But seeing it made me realize my own relationship wasn’t great, and it sucked.”

“Yeah, you were a shithead for a while there,” he agreed, but then his expression turned dark. “About that… What don’t I know?”

“Meaning?”

“With you and Joey. He shows up with a black eye after you break up, and so does Daire. Why? And don’t tell me nothing. Daire’s fucking crazy, but he wouldn’t do something like that without a reason.”

Damn, I’d forgotten he only knew about the bullying *after* we broke up. Daire was the only one who knew there was more to it, and it made me feel good to know I could trust him with my deepest, darkest secrets.

Well, even if he did retaliate against that asshole—but looking back, I couldn’t blame him for doing it. No point in protecting Joey now.

“He put his hands on me. Daire saw the bruises.”

I didn’t know my brother could look as murderous as he did right then.

“No,” he said, more to himself than me. He ran his fingers through his hair and gripped the ends tight. “What the fuck? Why? Why didn’t you tell

me? Tell *someone*."

"I left him. That was enough."

"Bullshit." Donovan jumped up and paced the trailer. "That's not nearly enough. He hurt you."

"And you guys did a stellar job of rectifying that wrong," I said. "So thank you."

"If I'd known that, I would've let Daire castrate him the way he wanted to."

"What?"

"That fucking bastard. If he shows back up at Astor, I'll kill him."

"No, you won't. It's over. He's not messing with me or anyone anymore. You all made your point more than well, and I appreciate it, but don't go jump him in the hall."

Donovan scoffed as he continued to pace. "Well, it won't be in the hall. I heard he just transferred. Him and his dick followers."

My mouth parted in surprise that was quickly followed by relief that I wouldn't even have to look at Joey anymore. "Seriously?"

"Yep. I heard the dean personally kicked them out for not upholding Astor standards and had them escorted off campus. I would've liked to see that walk of shame."

"Me too."

Donovan stopped moving, his hazel eyes laced with regret. "I wish I'd known. I always thought you could talk to me. Tell me anything."

I did. At least until that moment, but I had planned on carrying that with me to the grave. It was only by chance that Daire had even found out.

Still, if it'd been the other way around, I would be just as hurt as Donovan was, wouldn't I?

"You're right," I said. "I should've said something, especially to you, and I'm sorry for that. And I'm sorry for being an asshole to you and Kelly. I mean, I actually like him for you."

"Yeah?" Donovan sat back in his chair, facing me. "You do?"

"Of course I do. He thinks you hung the moon, he treats you right, and he's easy on the eyes. What more could I want for you?"

He tried to hold back a smile and failed miserably. "Thanks, Gav. I appreciate that. And just so you know, that's all I want for you too."

"Yeah? Even if it's with Daire?"

“Fucking Daire…” He tapped his lips, lost in thought. “Is this for real? Because all he asked me in the Sprinter—wait, no, *told* me was that he wanted to…you know.”

“Fuck me?”

“That. Yes. He didn’t say anything about dating.”

“Well, that just sort of happened. We haven’t really talked about it, so I was a little blown away he said that this morning.”

“And you…like him? Like that?”

The look of disbelief on his face had me chuckling. “You say that like it’s weird.”

“It *is* weird. No offense, but he can be a scary bastard at the best of times. Although…”

“Although what?”

“I mean…” He blew out a long breath. “I think he’s always had a thing for you. Or a soft spot, whatever.”

My eyes popped wide. “What? Why would you think that?”

“Because of the way he’s always gone uber protective when it comes to you. I always figured it was because you’re the youngest, but now… I don’t think that’s it.”

But…Daire was like that with all of us. He gave every one of the guys shit, but at the end of the day, if anyone messed with our group, they messed with him. Had it been different with me and I hadn’t seen it?

“And something else,” Donovan said. “You’re the only one who can get him to calm down when he’s fired up about something. Like you’re the only one he listens to.”

“Oh whatever—”

“Remember when he was about to throw down with that jock the day everyone found out about Preston? You stopped him from doing that. And the time some asshole looked at you wrong at the club, and all you had to do was put your hand on his arm and he chilled the hell out? I could go on and on.”

“That’s crazy,” I said, waving a hand to brush him off.

“It’s true, though. I never thought about it before now, but maybe it’s been staring us in the face this whole time but we couldn’t see past his scowls.” He tilted his head in thought. “Which would be a smart way to hide. If you just growl at everyone, no one would see or dare to ask what’s really behind that tough exterior.”

*Holy shit.* My brother had nailed exactly what I was coming to know about Daire—that there was more to him than what he showed the world. That there were so many hidden parts of him, things I wanted to know and hoped he'd open up about. He already had, more than I ever expected, but Donovan was figuring that out without knowing any specifics.

"Wow. No wonder everyone comes to you for a Van talk. That's impressive."

He grinned, showing off his pearly whites. "Thank you, that'll be two grand."

I shook my head and sucked down some of my soda, wondering if what he'd said could possibly be true. Had Daire ever looked at me as anything *more* and I'd been oblivious the whole time?

"So, is this your way of telling me you approve of me and Daire?" I said.

"I mean, he wasn't on my radar, but at least I know with him you'll be safe."

After everything I'd told him, I couldn't blame him for that being at the top of his list. And he was right—with Daire, I'd never felt safer. Among other things I wasn't about to tell my brother.

Donovan snapped his fingers. "Hey, Mom and Dad are coming home this week. You should do a dinner or something and bring Daire."

"Has all the hairspray gone to your head? I can't do that."

"Why not? He said it earlier, you're dating."

"That doesn't mean bring him to have dinner with our parents."

"Are you embarrassed or something?"

I balked. "What? No."

"If you don't invite him, he might think you are."

"If I don't invite him, he'll probably be grateful. You know he hates small talk and dressing up."

"I'm just sayin'." Donovan turned his chair around, meeting my eyes in the mirror, as several stylists and models made their way inside. "Can't hurt to ask. I bet he says yes."

"Oh, are we betting now? How about twenty bucks says he'll tell me I'm insane and to go by myself."

"Twenty? That won't even buy my lunch. Two hundred says he'll be putting a suit on and sitting his grumpy ass beside you with dear old Mom and Dad."

“Fine, I’ll take that bet,” I said, getting to my feet. “And don’t think I won’t mention you called Mom ‘old.’”

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# THIRTY-NINE

## *daire*

OF ALL THE stupid things I'd agreed to do in my life, *this* might be at the top of that list. The reflection from the mirror hanging on my door stared at the stranger standing in front of it, mocking my lust-hazed brain for writing checks I couldn't cash.

Well, that wasn't totally true. I had enough actual money to cover any check I'd be cashing tonight, but I was talking more emotional currency.

That, I was dirt fucking poor in. Always had been. And tonight that was going to be as obvious as the tie strangling me.

I reached up and pulled at it, slipping a finger behind the knot in an attempt to loosen the damn thing. But it was no use. It had been tied a year or so ago for an event I'd had to show up at, and after taking it on and off a handful of times since, the material had just cinched tighter.

Fuck it. I'd just have to grin and bear it. Too late to back out now.

Gavin had caught me in a post-climactic moment and sprung this invite when I was too blissed out to say no. Instead, I'd kissed him, promised the world, then fallen asleep—only to find him on the phone the next morning booking a table for four at one of New York's finest restaurants.

He was a sneaky little shit, something I was coming to realize more and more each day, and the fact he was ballsy enough to pull those stealth tactics on me was all kinds of hot.

But dinner with his parents? That felt like some kind of test, one that came with expectations I knew I couldn't live up to. What did I know about dealing with parents? It wasn't like I had any experience to go off.

I sighed and ran a hand through my hair, wondering if I was going to be able to pull this off. I didn't do this kind of thing. Go on dates, worry about another's feelings, stress about meeting parents.

How could I, when I'd never had a relationship that went past the time it took to get ourselves off?

But this was Gavin, and things between us were getting…*complicated*.

What started out as a hot roll between the sheets had begun to feel more emotional over the last few days. I'd never really cared to get to know my hookups in the past, but the more I learned about Gavin, the more I wanted to.

He was quirky and kinda nerdy, but could also give it back as good as he got, and something about that scrappy side of him called to me, made me feel comfortable enough to let my walls down.

There was a connection there that went beyond the physical. One I was shit at navigating, for sure, but if he wanted me to meet his parents for dinner tonight, then I guess that was what I was gonna do.

It wasn't like I hadn't met them before. They were members of the Elysium, so I'd spoken to them, shaken their hands. But that was before I was sleeping with their youngest son.

How would they react to that? I didn't have the best reputation in the group.

"Ah, there you are." Gavin slipped inside my bedroom and came to an abrupt standstill when he caught sight of me. "Wow."

I glanced to where he stood just inside my door, and felt my breath get caught in my throat. The picture he made was beyond gorgeous—a white dress shirt and slim-fit tartan suit and vest, a look that only he could pull off. It molded to all his lean lines, and in place of a standard tie he had a black bolo that had a big, puffy black flower at the neck's center.

He'd swept his hair to one side, leaving all his smooth skin on display, and it was a stark reminder that he came from a family of fashion models. A career he could easily step into with how stunning he looked tonight.

"Wow yourself. Never thought wrapping paper could look so hot."

"*Wrapping* paper?" Gavin strolled into my room and did a turn. "I'll have you know this is an Alexander McQueen."

I took hold of his hand, pulled him the last couple of steps to me, and kissed his pouty lips. "And I'll have *you* know I was joking. You look fucking amazing."

“Thank you. You look pretty damn amazing yourself.”

*Yeah, as long as I don’t pass out from lack of oxygen with this blasted tie.* “Thanks. Not my usual getup.”

Gavin smoothed a hand down my lapel. “But it suits you just the same.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“As you should. I’m the one looking at you, and”—he leaned back and ran his gaze down my black suit and shirt—“I like what I see a lot.”

“Uh huh.” I shook my head. “I look like a stuffed shirt.”

“Hardly. Try a dark, sexy prince, whose mission tonight is to corrupt me.”

I snorted. “That’s some imagination you’ve got. But you don’t need to kiss my ass, you know. I’m coming tonight either way.”

Gavin smirked. “Well, I thought you’d like my lips on your ass when you come, but if not…”

My cock definitely liked that idea, but since I was trying not to make a total ass of myself in front of Gavin’s parents, the last thing I wanted was for us to show up smelling like sex.

So I removed his hand and took a step back. “Ask me that again later.”

Gavin tilted his head to side, giving me another once-over. But this time he zeroed in on my fidgeting fingers as I tapped the side of my legs. His eyes saw a little too much, as always. “Are you okay? You seem a little… Are you nervous?”

“I’m about to meet your parents—what do you think?”

A bright smile lit Gavin’s entire face. “But you’ve already met my parents.”

“Not like this.” I gestured between us.

“And what’s this?” he asked, his eyes all but fucking twinkling at me. But I wasn’t walking into that one. I wasn’t putting labels on things, especially not tonight.

God knew I never got things right—what would make him think I knew what he was thinking?

“Nothing, I just meant dressed like this.”

“Uh huh, sure you did. But there’s no need to be nervous.” He stopped by the door and turned back to give me one last look. “You look perfect. They’re going to love you, just like— Um, hurry, yeah? We’re going to be late.”

My heart thudded under his lingering gaze, because for a moment there, I could've sworn Gavin was about to say: *Just like I do.*

But that was crazy, right?

THIS WAS TURNING out so much worse than I'd originally thought. From the moment we stepped out of the Sprinter and I'd seen where we were dining—Le Bernardin—I knew I was screwed.

It was one of the most expensive restaurants in the city, not to mention the most elegant, and even though I moved in circles that expected this kind of a meal whenever they ate out, I felt like a fish out of water.

"Stop fiddling with your tie."

*Damn it.* I hadn't even realized I was doing that. I shook my head, and Gavin leaned in to my side, brushing the back of his hand along mine.

"Breathe, would you? It's just dinner."

Yeah, dinner with his supermodel mom and uber-powerful cable network CEO dad, who would expect me to know how to sit and act in a restaurant of this caliber. Problem was, I generally zoned out on formal occasions and spent most of my time at the bar. Something I didn't think was going to help me a whole lot tonight.

"Maybe I should just go. Let you three have dinner, and we could meet up after." That sounded like a good idea to me, until I made the mistake of looking at Gavin, whose wide eyes had filled with disappointment.

"Oh, um, well, if you're really that uncomfortable…"

Now I felt like a total shit. Here was Gavin trying to introduce me to two of the people he cared about the most, and I was once again weighing him down with my baggage.

"Nah, I'm good. Just not used to the whole suit and tie getup."

His disappointment was instantly replaced by a good-natured smile as he took my hand and pulled me out of the doorway and over to one of the shrubberies lining the front of the building.

"I can help with that." A second later, he reached for my tie and hooked a finger through the tight knot, loosening it. Then he unfastened and pulled the material free of its stranglehold, sliding it from my neck. "There. How's that?"

"Better."

Gavin grinned, then flicked open the top three buttons of my shirt and spread it apart, before reaching up and ruffling his fingers through my hair.

“As much as I liked the slicked-back, chic version of you I found in your bedroom tonight, I’m kind of fond of my rough diamond.”

“Oh yeah?”

Gavin put his palm over my chest, and the tie tickled my bare skin as he moved up to his toes and kissed my cheek. “Yeah, it’s my favorite find ever.”

I cradled his face between my hands and lowered my head, whispering across his lips, “What the hell are you doing to me?”

“Right now? Taking you to dinner.”

I closed my eyes and took in a deep breath, his cologne filling my head with something I wasn’t at all familiar with—hope and possibilities. It was a heady feeling, one that made me feel a little trippy as I gripped the hand on my chest and touched the tie he still held.

“What are we going to do with this?”

Gavin smiled mischievously as he stepped around me, looked both ways, then quickly stuffed it into the shrubbery. “Ta-da. Magic.”

His grin was so ridiculous that I couldn’t help but reach for him and steal a kiss.

“All right, let’s go meet the parental units.”

Gavin nodded and headed toward the restaurant door, and I opened it before he could, catching his eye with a wink.

A pink hue colored his cheeks as he stepped up to the hostess and gave his name, and moments later we were making our way through the tables and chairs toward a table in the back. I immediately spotted Gavin’s mom laughing at something his dad had just said. She had a hand resting over his on top of the table and was leaning in to him with an open smile on her face, love and admiration shining up at her husband.

It was easy to see where Gavin and Donovan got their carefree, loving nature from. Even after all these years, Kimberly Thompson was the very epitome of a woman in love.

“Gavin.” She got to her feet, coming around the table to greet her son with a hug and kiss to both cheeks before she stood back and gave him a thorough once-over. “Don’t *you* look gorgeous.”

“As do you.” He laughed, holding their hands out and gesturing to her dress. “Dior?”

“Mhmm. Arrived just in time for tonight.”

Something Mr. Truitt was clearly happy about, judging by the way he couldn't take his eyes off his wife.

"But enough about that. Daire, it's lovely to see you tonight. Gavin here told me you'd be joining us."

"Yes. Thank you for inviting me." I tried my hardest for a smile, but as out of practice as I was, I wondered if it looked more like a snarl.

"So how long have you two been cozying up with one another?"

"*Mom*."

"What? I didn't misunderstand that, did I? I thought you said you were dating?"

"Oh my God." Gavin shook his head, his embarrassment a tangible thing as he stood next to me looking everywhere but at me. "We aren't even sitting down yet."

His mom's lips tipped into a coy smile as she gestured to the table. "Then by all means, please sit."

I swallowed around the lump in my throat, wondering if anyone would notice if I just excused myself for the restroom and never came back.

"Kimberly, get back over here." Gavin's dad held his hand out to her, and she scooted in beside him. "You could've at least ordered them a drink before you started in on them."

"Oh, stop it." She waved a hand through the air. "You know me. When I'm excited about something, I can't help myself."

She was *excited* about the idea of my dating Gavin? Not horrified? I had to have heard that wrong.

"I think I always knew," she said, grinning at the two of us. "There was just something special there."

Gavin cleared his throat, and it was as if the nerves I'd been feeling all evening and afternoon were suddenly transferred to him. He was fidgeting with the hem of his suit jacket, and I reached over to put my hand over the top of his.

"I think you might be right," I finally said, and Gavin's eyes widened.

Gavin's parents looked between the two of us with something I'd never expected to see directed my way—approval—and I decided right then the Truitt clan was pretty damn amazing.

"So was it the move that finally brought you both together?"

"Seriously, Mom?" Gavin snagged one of the waiters passing by. "Could I please get a gin and dubonnet, and a—" He looked my way.

“Reposado neat for me.”

The waiter nodded, and Gavin added, “As soon as possible.”

As he hurried off, Kimberly, not to be deterred, picked right up with where she’d left off.

“But it was so nice of Jacques to let you boys switch around like that. Especially with Kelly moving in with Van. This way, you won’t all be tripping over each other.”

Something I’d rather not think about at all. Donovan and Kelly were cool, but the last thing I wanted was an up-close, live version of a porn video I’d already watched. And I knew for *damn* sure Gavin didn’t want to see that.

So Mr. LaRue—West’s dad, and the CEO of the Towers—had definitely done us a solid letting us play musical apartments. Kind of like the way he’d urged me to take one of them in the first place.

If it hadn’t been for his sizing me up as some loner in the corner at one of the Elysium events and suggesting I move into the Towers, I never would’ve met Gavin or the rest or the group, and I was just starting to realize how boring my life would’ve been.

“Well, I for one am happy to hear about all this,” Mr. Truitt said before taking a sip of his drink. “It makes a father worry a little less knowing his youngest has a strapping young man like you looking out for him.”

Looking out for Gavin? Oh shit, was he talking about what me and the guys had done to Joey and his douchebag friends? Had Donovan told them? *No way.*

“Gavin explained how you stepped in at the end of the year when he broke up with Joey.” Mr. Truitt’s eyes darkened, and I wondered how much he actually knew about what really happened. “We never got a chance to thank you back then for making sure he was okay, so I’d like to now. Thank you.”

“Yeah, of course.” I nodded. “No one will ever hurt him again.”

I meant every word of that, too. But as we picked up the menu and placed our orders, the table fell quiet, and the same old fears I’d always lived with began to creep back in. The ones that were always there, lurking in the shadows. The ones that told me I wasn’t good enough.

Because while I wouldn’t let anyone else ever hurt Gavin again, that didn’t mean I wouldn’t.

Did it?

Gavin reached under the table and took my hand, lacing our fingers, and I could see pride and respect shimmering in his eyes. And I knew right then that no, I would never hurt this beautiful man sitting beside me either.

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# FORTY

## *gavin*

FOR A GUY who said he didn’t do well with parents, Daire had sure as hell won mine over. Bringing him to officially meet them was already a huge feat for me, considering I’d never brought Joey around. Maybe there had been something deep inside me, even then, that knew he was bad news and my family would see right through him.

Daire, though, they’d embraced immediately. Even though he’d been hesitant and nervous when we arrived, once he realized he didn’t have to play defense, that he was accepted as he was, I could see his shoulders visibly relax.

A couple hours later and we were both back in our element, commandeering the bar at Church, an exclusive members-only nightclub we frequented that used to be something much holier. From the outside, you’d think the Gothic revival building with its stained-glass windows was still hosting Sunday services—*not* the debauchery that ensued late into the night.

Dirty deeds were already going down in the green velvet booths lining the room, while burlesque dancers performed in the center.

But I only had eyes for one man.

Daire had gotten rid of his jacket on the way over here, and with the buttons undone halfway down his shirt, the sexy, tanned skin it revealed had me two seconds away from dragging him into the confessional booth.

The only thing that stopped me was that one of the guys had ordered us a round of shots—and the hot remix that pulsated through the club. Daire

wasn’t a dancer, but I was, and he didn’t seem to have a problem letting me grind all over him.

*Oh how far we’ve come since the yacht...*

As I shimmied down his body, I let my hands trail over him, making sure everyone could see that this man was mine.

It wasn’t just amusement on Daire’s face as I slowly rose back up, keeping my body pressed against his as I swayed my hips to the beat. If the semi in his pants didn’t tell me, the predatory look in his eyes did.

He was enjoying this as much as me.

“This is freaking me the fuck out,” West said, shaking his head at us. “Daire hasn’t growled all night.”

“Not true.” Travis shook his head. “Someone looked a little too long at Gavin a second ago, and that familiar snarl came out.”

Their words only made me hotter for the growly one now smoothing his hands over my ass, because damn if I didn’t love the way Daire wanted to rip out any eyes that lingered on me too long.

“Yeah, but it’s weird, right? Dancing, *talking*, drinking with us other humans as though he’s actually enjoying our company?”

Travis snorted. “Well, I don’t think he gives a fuck about your company. But Gavin’s? I think he wants to enjoy more than his company, if you get my drift.”

When they all went a little too quiet, my eyes shifted to the bewildered faces watching us.

But Travis wasn’t wrong. I did want to enjoy every bit of Daire I could get. Especially when he leaned down, put his lips to my neck, and kissed a scorching path up under my ear.

“Mmm,” he said, and the sound vibrated through me much the same as the throb of the bass thumping through the speakers. “You keep rubbing your dick all over me and we’re gonna finish this dance somewhere private.”

“Is that supposed to make me wanna stop?” I tipped my head back, allowing him access to my throat.

Daire trailed his teasing tongue down to my primly buttoned shirt, and when he got to my designer bolo, he nuzzled his nose into the black flower at the base.

“Later, I wanna see you in this, and *only* this.”

I gripped the back of his hair, yanking his face up so I could look him in the eye. “Around my neck?”

“I was thinking a little lower.”

“Were you now?”

He nipped at my chin and then scraped his teeth along my jaw, making my head spin. Who needed alcohol with Daire around? His lips and words intoxicated me, to the point my head was spinning and I felt like I could damn near float across the floor.

“I can’t decide which is more disturbing: Daire and Gavin or the fact that Preston brought Mr. Carrington here.” East swirled his martini, nose wrinkled as he stared between the two couples.

Archer rolled his eyes as he took a shot from the glasses the bartender was lining up, one for Preston and then one for himself. “For fuck’s sake, it’s Archer, you little shit.”

Preston chuckled, resting his back against his twice-his-age boyfriend. “Besides, only I get to call him that, and on special occasions.”

“This is so much TMI I’m gonna need ten more of these.” Donovan began to pass the shots around to the rest of us as Daire snorted.

“Like you can talk,” he said.

West pointed to Daire’s mouth. “Do you see this? Words are coming out of this hole in his face. What is happening?”

Daire snapped his teeth at West, almost nipping his finger.

“Whoa, down, boy,” West said, but smartly stepped back over to JT.

I sniffed at the glass and should’ve known before I did what that clear liquid was. “Tequila? Really?”

“Buyer’s choice.” Daire shrugged.

Something fruitier would’ve been more up my alley, but I had a cocktail to wash it down with.

“All attention on my gorgeous ass.” East tossed the back panel of his jacket aside to show off the fit of his pants that, yes, encased a decent ass. He picked up the final shot and held it up in the air. “Cheers to Gavin, cheers to Daire. Cheers to fucking the growl right out of the bear.”

I laughed and clinked my glass against the others, and as I downed the tequila, I heard Donovan say, “Man, I can’t drink to *that*.”

East let out an exaggerated sigh as he set his empty glass on the bar top. “Fine. For you: cheers to Gavin, cheers to Daire. Cheers to getting the grumpy bastard to care. How’s that?”

Donovan nodded. “Better.”

Surprisingly, the tequila was smoother than I expected, and tasted even better when Daire turned me in his arms and his mouth came crashing down on mine. The taste of the liquor on his tongue was so appealing that I decided this was how I’d take my shots from now on—with Daire’s mouth as my chaser.

“Get a room!” someone called out as another one of our friends added, “They have a whole fuckin’ apartment.”

“Right, so wait—dating, fucking, *and* living together. Does that mean you two are…boyfriends?”

Archer took a sip of his drink. “Moments like this, I swear I feel like I’m back in college.”

“And not when you put your dick in Preston?”

“*East*.” Preston shoved the loudmouth in the arm, but I was too busy replaying Travis’s question.

Boyfriends? Was that what we were? I knew what I wanted, but we hadn’t been putting labels on things, and I didn’t want Daire to feel pressured.

Something he clearly *wasn’t* feeling when he nipped my ear and told the group, “Well, we definitely aren’t girlfriends.”

A thrill shot down my spine as I turned in his arms, my heart full of hope as I stared at him with a mixture of nerves and excitement. “You want to be my boyfriend?”

Daire grazed his lips over mine, tightening his hold on my waist. “I already *am* your boyfriend.”

It was such a Daire response, so blunt and possessive, his voice brooking no argument—not that I wanted to give one. I’d been wanting to claim him as mine from the moment he took me in the Sprinter van.

But, feeling a little bit flirty, a little bit cheeky, I decided to revive #OperationTortureDaire. “You think so, do you?”

“I know so.”

I wound my arms around his neck, threading my fingers through his hair. “I don’t remember you asking me.”

Daire chuckled, a sexy sound that made my dick punch against the zipper of my tight tartan pants.

“You want me to ask?”

I shrugged, playing coy. “It would be *nice*.”

“Gavin?”

“Yes, D?”

“You’re really going to make me say this?”

“I mean, if you want to take my flower later.” I batted my lashes for added effect, and he grabbed my ass, pulling me in against his rock-hard cock.

“Be my boyfriend?”

I nipped along his jaw line to his ear. “You can do better than that.”

Daire growled. “Be mine. So I can be yours. And everyone else can fuck right off.”

*Holy shit.* When Daire brought it, he *brought* it. I wasn’t sure I’d swooned so hard in my life.

“Now that’s the easiest yes I’ve ever said.” I angled my head to take his lips again, but someone called out, “They have a confessional for that.”

Those booths were about the only thing that had remained and been turned into private places to hook up. Surprisingly, I’d never ventured into one, but with Daire, and all these eyes on us, I could see the appeal.

“Hmm, that’s not a bad idea,” I said, brushing my mouth against his as I let my hand fall over the curve of his ass. “What do you think? Feel like taking my flower earlier rather than later?”

Daire’s cock twitched against my hip, and when I heard a low rumble from his chest, that was all the answer I needed. I intertwined our fingers and walked backward through the crowd, leading him toward the sinful booths, eager to thank God for this broody mystery of a man that was all mine—and apparently now my boyfriend.

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# FORTY-ONE

## *daire*

“HAVE A GOOD one,” the shop owner called out as I shoved my wallet in the back pocket of my jeans and stepped out into the brightest, warmest day we’d had in a long time.

Spring was too happy a season for me, but for once, I didn’t turn my nose up at the way every New Yorker was outside today to enjoy the weather. I’d had a good morning, a successful one, which meant my mood was better than it usually was as I threw on my sunglasses and didn’t curse at any pedestrians.

Okay, that was a lie. One dumbass was walking in the bike lane and would’ve gotten knocked on his ass if I hadn’t told him, “Move, motherfucker.”

There. My good deed for the day. Gavin would be so proud.

Just the thought of him had my frigid insides thawing. It was strange the way one person could have such an effect on me, could make me want something more than just going through the motions and resenting everyone and everything. But Gavin was the one bright light in a world that had been too dark for too long, and I wasn’t about to let him go, no matter how many self-sabotaging thoughts tried to break through.

My pocket vibrated, and I pulled out my phone to see Gavin had messaged.

GAVIN:

I’m almost there!

No rush, see you soon

Turning the corner, I found myself staring down at my phone, waiting for another response, just like all the assholes I'd always hated, eyes glued to their cells instead of looking out for where the hell they were going—and whaddya know, I clipped someone in the shoulder because I wasn't paying attention.

"For fuck's sake."

I stepped off to the side, getting my ass out of the way. When Gavin didn't respond, I shoved my phone back in my pocket, but before I could start moving again, my eyes landed on a couple sitting at a restaurant's outside table, drinking white wine and laughing like they didn't have a care in the world.

Claudia's back was to me, but I could clearly see Patrick's, my birth father's, face for the first time in years. He hadn't changed much at all, just a few more lines around his eyes and silver at his temples, contrasting the full head of black hair, the same color as mine. Where he was a little lighter-skinned, Claudia was more tanned, and I hated that I was such an obvious mix of them both. Seeing them together was a glimpse at what I'd look like in the future.

It was also a fucking jolt to my system.

From here, I could hear the thick Irish brogue as Patrick spoke, could hear Claudia's grating laugh, and I wondered—if I were to walk by, would they even notice me?

Probably not. They were too caught up in each other and their own bubble to give a shit about anyone else. I tensed, waiting for the rage that always raced through my veins when I saw them. The feeling of inadequacy and defeat that would settle in the pit of my stomach. The curses that would fly off the tip of my tongue without a second thought.

But it didn't happen.

The longer I stood there, the more I stared at the two people who should care about me most in the world, the more they looked like complete strangers.

They weren't my family. They didn't know me, didn't care to, and I didn't give a shit to know them either. Why would I, when they'd only let me down my entire life? Why would I care about people like that? Why bother getting upset about it? Especially when I had someone in my life

who actually saw me, with all my hang-ups and flaws, and still made every effort to show me he cared.

Thinking of the way Gavin had stubbornly kept pursuing me, even when I pushed him away constantly, had my chest tightening. He cared about me when he didn't have to. He could've said "fuck it" at any point, that I wasn't worth it, and I wouldn't have blamed him for it.

Instead, he'd told me I *was* worth it. Even if I wasn't sure I believed him yet, and that…meant everything.

The two sitting a few feet away from me? They meant nothing. Less than nothing. And that was all the attention I'd give them from now on.

I started back down the sidewalk, passing them as I headed to meet Gavin and not giving them a second look. And just like I thought, they didn't pay me any attention either. No calling out my name, no double takes out of the corner of my eye.

And that was fine. That was just the way I wanted it from now on.

I rounded the corner, and just like that, they were gone from my mind. In their place was the gorgeous man I was about to meet up with—and as if I'd willed him to appear, Gavin stepped out from under the Rubirosa sign and waved in my direction.

A feeling of peace settled over me in a way I'd never experienced.

Peace and…happiness.

"I beat you." Gavin met up with me, wrapping an arm around my waist. The easy familiarity between us only added to my unusually good mood. "I thought you were just around the corner."

"I was—just got held up for a sec."

Gavin cocked his head. "Oh? Everything okay?"

"Yep." The spiral that usually happened whenever I saw Claudia and Patrick was nowhere in sight. "I'll tell you about it inside. Come on."

I took Gavin's hand and led him inside the casual pizzeria, the two of us opting for something cozier than one of the fancier places downtown. Plus, Rubirosa served a killer slice, and I was ready to eat several.

We slid into one of the booths in the far back corner, and instead of taking the opposite side, I slid in beside Gavin.

"Ooh." He smiled as my leg brushed up against his. "Please, come closer."

"Don't mind if I do." I threw my arm across the back of the booth and lowered my head to nuzzle at the sweet spot behind his ear.

Gavin chuckled, his hand finding my leg under the table as he leaned into my touch. “What’s gotten into you? Not that I’m complaining.”

“Nothin’. I just missed you today, that’s all.”

“Aw, me too. Stupid essay.” Gavin sighed and turned to brush a kiss across my lips. “But I appreciate your giving me the afternoon. There’s no way I could’ve gotten it done with you there.”

“I get it. You distract the hell out of me too.” I reached for his hand, pulling it a little further up my leg. “See?”

“Oh, I definitely see, *and* feel…” Gavin squeezed, and I growled against his neck. “But so will the rest of the customers if you don’t quit.”

“That would be a problem?”

“Only if you want to see my jealous side.”

I searched his face, looking for the “just kidding” in his expression. But no, he was dead serious—and *that* was hot as fuck.

“Okay, you win. As much as I think I’d like to see that.”

Gavin flipped open the menu between us. “Do you know what you want? I personally love the—”

“Tie Dye Pizza,” we said at the same time.

Gavin grinned and shrugged, shoving the menus back where they’d been. “Well, that was easy.”

“Something else we have in common.”

“How did I not know that?”

“We’ve never been here before.”

“Together, at least.”

“Right.” And what a damn shame that was. It also had me wondering what else we both liked and had no idea about. But before I could dive a little deeper, the waiter stopped by to take our order, and a few minutes later, he was back with our drinks. We’d both opted for soda, deciding to give our livers a bit of a reprieve after our night out at Church.

Gavin took a sip then turned to face me. “So what happened earlier? You said you got held up.”

I was hoping he’d forgotten about that. But unlike all the other times Claudia and Patrick came up, that anger and dark cloud that usually rolled in was nowhere to be found. Instead, I felt…nothing.

“I saw my parents, or at least, the two who claim to be them.”

Gavin’s smile immediately fell, the color in his face draining. “Daire… I… Are you okay?”

I took his hand under the table and stroked my thumb across the top of it. “Yeah, actually. I’m pretty damn good.”

“But…” Gavin blinked as though he was trying to find his words. “You let me go on and on just now. Why didn’t you tell me when we sat down?”

“*Because* I’m good.” When my lips tugged up at the side, Gavin frowned and *that* made me laugh. I reached up and smoothed my thumb over the furrow there. “Seeing them today, I felt nothing.”

The sadness that filled Gavin’s eyes had me squeezing his hand and scooting in even closer, because he’d clearly misunderstood.

“Nope. Don’t do that. At least not over this. I *wanted* to feel nothing. It means they don’t have a hold on me anymore. You know why? Because of you.”

“But I didn’t do anything.”

“Didn’t you?” I scanned the crowded restaurant then brought my attention back to him. “You ever known me to wanna hang out in public? Or to smile when I step outside on a fuckin’ spring day? Because I gotta tell you, I was kinda beaming earlier and didn’t even feel stupid about it. I mean, who the hell am I?”

A burst of laughter escaped him. “You smiled? Did anyone run screaming in the opposite direction?”

I shook my head. “Not that I noticed.”

“I’d like to see that, actually.”

“People screaming to get away from me?”

Gavin rolled his eyes and knocked his shoulder into mine. “No. Your smile.” He angled himself toward me. “Go on. Show me.”

“It doesn’t work like that.”

“Sure, it does. Aaand *go*.”

“I don’t smile on command.”

“Well then, pretend I’ve said something really funny.”

“Why don’t you *actually* say something funny and maybe it’ll happen.”

“I don’t think you can do it.”

“Reverse psychology won’t work either.”

He pouted, and it was so fucking cute I was tempted to give him what he wanted. Too bad I liked playing with him more.

“Did I ever tell you”—he traced the top of my hand resting on his thigh—“what I thought about the video East sent? The night you guys messed with Joey and his friends?”

I scowled at the mention of those fuckheads. “Pretty sure you let me know when you got home that night. You were pissed.”

“I was. But I was more pissed about the fact that I watched you threaten Joey and found it”—he leaned in by my ear—“so. Damn. Hot.”

My brows shot up. “Really?”

He covered my hand with his and inched it up to where his cock was getting hard behind his pants. “The way you protected me—and that sexy, murderous growl? I would’ve let you fuck me that night.”

Now that had me grinning, remembering the way I’d kissed him during his outrage, the way I could feel he wanted more. “Yeah. I know.”

“So cocky,” Gavin said, pulling back with a smirk. “And PS—you’re smiling. I win.”

I forced my face back into a frown, but he’d already busted me. “What do you win?”

“I’m thinking…” He paused as the server came out with our massive pizza. “An extra slice of *that*.”

“By extra slice, you mean one of mine?”

Gavin reached for one, and it was as big as his plate. “We’re boyfriends now. What’s yours is mine. Those are the rules.”

“Bullshit. I’m new at this, but I’m not an idiot.” I grabbed my own slice, took a huge bite, and knew right then we’d be getting a second one to go, because there was no way I was sharing.

Gavin would just have to mark that down as something else I needed to work on.

Then again, if he kept grinning at me like that, I’d probably end up giving in. I could already sense the way he was wrapping me around his finger, but shit, I needed to at least give him hell about it and not make it *so* easy.

That pretty face was gonna be the death of me.

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# FORTY-TWO

## *gavin*

I KNEW THIS thing with Daire would work when he ordered another pizza to go and put it in our fridge for later. Wasn't that what most relationships were really based on anyway? Food? What did we have to fight about as long as we agreed on a good slice?

At least, that was what I'd heard. It wasn't like I was the poster child for healthy relationships.

I had a gut feeling this one was going to be different, though.

"You want a drink, or you good?" Daire said, reaching for the glasses.

"Nah, I'm okay for now. Just gonna grab something." I headed into my room and pulled open my top dresser drawer. The small box in the corner was nothing fancy from the outside, no ribbons or any branding, just plain black. Just the way Daire would like it.

God, I hoped he liked it.

As soon as I bought it, I'd kept looking for the right time to give it to him, and then wondered if it was too much or if he'd hate it. But he'd mentioned running into his parents today, and the way he said they didn't have a hold on him anymore, and the timing just felt…right.

Blowing out a breath, I walked back into the living room to see Daire had forgone the drinks in favor of his guitar. He sat on the couch with his bare feet kicked up on the coffee table, so relaxed and gorgeous I could only watch as he tuned the instrument I rarely saw him play.

Of all the ways I'd seen him over the past few years, this had to be one of my favorites. Daire at home, no defenses up, just unwinding after a long day. I imagined he'd done this more often before I moved in, and I

would’ve stayed there watching him all night if he hadn’t looked up and caught me staring.

He patted the cushion beside him, and I kicked my shoes off under the table and joined him.

“You look good like this,” I said, curling one leg up beneath me as he strummed softly. “How come I never hear you play?”

“I don’t do it much anymore. My knuckles are usually busted up pretty good after a fight.”

I didn’t know the song he played, if it was even one at all or if he was just fooling around, but whatever it was, I liked it.

“What made you start?” I asked, and then grinned. “Did you wanna be a rock star?”

“Hell no.” He stopped playing abruptly, resting his hand across the strings. “I was just alone a lot. My room was a lot less quiet when I played.”

God, I hated that—hated that he ever felt alone or unwanted or unloved. It made me want to confront his parents myself, to ask why they couldn’t see the amazing man in front of me.

“What’s that?” Daire nodded to the box I held, and I swallowed.

“It’s for you.”

“Me?”

“Of course. I saw it and— Well, just open it.”

I held the box toward him, and he looked at it curiously before setting his guitar aside.

“You don’t have to buy me anything.”

“Don’t tell me what to do,” I teased, trying to keep things light because my heart was starting to beat a little faster and my palms were sweaty.

I casually rubbed them over my pants as Daire lifted the top off the box. He went still as he stared at its contents, and I cleared my throat when he didn’t say anything.

“It’s a St. Michael pendant,” I said. “He’s a defender and protector.”

“I know who he is,” Daire said quietly, still not moving.

I bit down on my lip. “It’s just… St. Jude doesn’t fit you. You’re not a hopeless *or* lost cause.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“I do.” I reached over and pulled out the silver oval charm. “You’ve been looking after me from the moment we met.”

“No, I—”

“Yeah, you have. And the thing is, you don’t even realize you’re doing it. It’s like second nature to you, a natural instinct to protect those you are care about, and call me crazy, but I think you might care about me.”

Daire’s lips quirked. “You think so, huh?”

“Well, you did practically *beg* to be my boyfriend.”

Daire reached for the pendant, smoothing his thumb over the saintly figure engraved on the metal. “Well over the last couple of weeks you’ve shown me what it feels like to have someone give a shit about me. To have someone *want* to be with me the way I am.”

I held my breath, wondering if maybe I’d pushed too hard too fast.

“I want to deserve you.” He swallowed, turning the charm over between his fingers. “I want to be what you need, but this…? I don’t know if I’m this.”

I shifted into his side. “You’re right. You’re so much *more* than this. You’re a protector, a friend, a lover, and a badass fighter. You’re my boyfriend, and I love who you are.”

“Which makes you either a saint or a fucking masochist. But either way, I’m not about to complain. For some insane reason you want to be with me, and I want to deserve that. I want to deserve your trust and those feelings. But I can’t change who I am, and all I can think is I’ll eventually fuck this up.”

“Hmm.” I shifted up to my knees and swung one of my legs over the top of his, settling down on his lap. “What if I tell you I won’t *let* you fuck it up?”

Daire took a deep breath and shook his head. “I don’t know why you’re betting on me.”

“Because,” I said, taking his face between my hands, “you once told me you never lose.”

“In a fight. That’s different.”

“It’s not.” I leaned in and brushed my lips over his. “Not if you decide to fight for me.”

The expression in Daire’s eyes was full of something I’d never seen there before—hope.

I slid my hands around his neck to unclasp his necklace. “You’re not a lost cause, D. You’re with me, and I’ll never let you get lost again.”

Daire’s hands moved to my hips as I removed the old pendant and replaced it with the new.

“Perfect.” I smiled at him, and he grabbed my wrist and planted a kiss against my palm. And then he was pulling me forward, holding my face between his hands as he brushed his lips over mine.

This…this was the real Daire. The one who wanted someone to see him. Choose him.

And he was all mine.

The kiss deepened, his tongue sweeping into my mouth and tasting every part of me. I speared my hands through his hair, holding him in place as though if I let go he might disappear. That this moment would have been all in my head. But no, Daire’s hands were on my hips urging me closer, and as I pushed up on my knees and deepened the embrace, my heart felt close to bursting.

“Daire.” I lifted my head, needing to see with my own two eyes what I was feeling in his kiss—and right there, in place of the mystery and the tough wall of defense, was love.

It was etched into every feature of his expression as he stared up at me, open and vulnerable.

“Trust me,” I whispered. “Let me be the one to show you *exactly* what you’re worth.”

If it hadn’t been for Daire’s Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat, I would’ve wondered if he’d heard me. But when he nodded and reached for the hem of my shirt, I helped him tear it up over my head.

I quickly scooted off his lap, ridding myself of my sweats, not about to let him think too hard about what I’d said. If he did that, he might change his mind. He might start to panic and leave. But as I stripped out of my clothes and kicked them aside, I realized the man who’d just torn his own shirt off and unbuttoned his jeans was going nowhere.

Daire’s focus was unwavering as I went to grab the lube out of the side table, where we’d stashed it sometime last week. But when I handed him a condom, he caught my hand and stilled.

“I want to know every part of you, if you want that too. I want to feel every part of you when you fall apart in my arms tonight.” Daire drew me forward, back down onto his naked lap, where his heavy cock stood waiting for me.

I nodded, stroking my slick hands up and down his throbbing length. Daire's eyes never wavered from mine, his chest rising and falling with each steady pull.

"I want that too."

He reached down to stop my hand, sliding his palm over mine as he tangled our fingers, getting them slippery and wet.

"Then c'mere."

The order was soft, but I instantly obeyed, shifting to my knees. Daire wrapped an arm around my waist, trailing his fingers down my crack and in between, teasing my entrance.

My dick jerked between us, the gentle way his finger massaged me causing a shiver of desire to spread through me. He pushed inside, his finger entering me slowly, stretching me, and then he added a second and third. Then I reached for his face and took the kiss I could no longer live without.

A moan of pure pleasure escaped me into him as he removed his hand and replaced it with the wide head of his cock.

"Love me," he said against my lips, as I slowly lowered onto him. "Because somewhere around forever ago, I fell in love with you."

My breath caught as I sat there with his life pulsing inside me, and it felt like my heart was beating in time with his as I placed my palm over his chest and closed my eyes.

"I think I've always loved you."

Daire smoothed his hands around my hips to my bare cheeks, and I began to move, slowly at first, deliberately. I wanted to feel every inch of him as he pulled from my body, every inch of him when he sank back in. I wanted to surround him with my body, heart and soul. I never wanted to let him go. I wanted him to know that with me, he was safe. Just like I was with him. That with me, he could let go.

I reached for his hand, bringing it up to cover my heart, then placed mine over his, the steady beat of it creating a rhythm for my hips to follow. I rolled my body against his. Daire's fingers trailed up my spine and brought my lips back to his, the kiss we shared then a true meeting of the souls.

It was as if I'd been waiting for him my entire life. I'd been waiting for this moment. Where we could give to each other freely, with no barriers between us.

“Gavin…”

My name on his lips had me picking up the pace, deepening the kiss. The bond between us strengthened as we sealed our promise to love each other without words, and never had I felt such a connection with another person.

Then our eyes met and my climax threatened. The need to release, and let all of this love out, was right there as Daire looked into my eyes.

“Come with me,” I said, hooking my fingers around his pendant. “Mark me as yours…forever.”

Daire thrust his hips, the passion between us now at fever pitch as we raced toward the finish line, sharing the breath inside us.

I felt enveloped by him. His arms, his mouth, his body had become one with mine. My muscles flexed, my knees tightened around his hips, and when he tore his lips from mine and shouted my name, the warm flood of his arousal inside me had mine exploding between us, painting him in the proof of my feelings.

How had I lived before this moment? How had I existed without knowing the love of this man under me? I had no idea. But one thing I did know was that I never wanted to go another day without knowing what it was like to be loved by Daire Connery.

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# FORTY-THREE

## *daire*

A COUPLE WEEKS later, I stood outside a row of buildings on the west side of the city in a full-on downpour as I waited for Gavin. The black umbrella shielded me from most of the blasting rain, at least until the wind blew and it went sideways.

Didn't matter to me. I was still a little overheated from my workout, and if I wasn't about to go inside somewhere that wouldn't appreciate my being drenched and leaving puddles all over their floor, I wouldn't have bothered with the umbrella.

I glanced up to see the Sprinter making its way through traffic, my anticipation rising at seeing Gavin after long hours away.

Being the good student he was, and me still not giving much of a shit about anything educational, he'd been prepping for final exams while I hit the gym.

Scotty pulled over to the sidewalk a block away, and Gavin quickly jumped out, which told me someone was too impatient to wait in traffic. He took off down the sidewalk, umbrella angled to head off the sheets of rain, and I went in his direction to meet him halfway.

"You're crazy," I called out as he got close, and he grinned, not slowing down until he was in front of me, dipping under my umbrella for a kiss.

"Can't help it. I wanted to see you." At some point he'd gotten wet, because his hair was a darker blond and rain-slicked away from his face. Fucking gorgeous.

"Get everything done?" I asked as I took his hand, lacing our fingers together and walking back down the block.

“Yep. I’m so ready for this semester to be over already. Think we can convince the guys we need a month-long trip somewhere far away?”

“East probably already has something planned to the minute, knowing him. But if he doesn’t, maybe we can do our own thing.”

Gavin looked at me. “Really? You’d want to?”

“No, I’d hate it.” I snorted and squeezed his fingers. “Of course I would.”

“I’d like that.” He smiled, but then stopped walking, jerking me to a stop. “What about your practice, though? You can’t be away that long while you’re still learning the ropes.”

“Says who?”

“Uh, I’m sure your coach would be pissed.”

I lifted a brow. “Since when have I ever let someone else dictate what I do?”

“Never, but this is different. MMA training is a big deal. Speaking of, how’d practice go today?”

“Fine. Not sure about all these rules yet. They get in my fucking way.”

“I thought the only rules were no ball kicks or gouging out someone’s eyes. That a problem for you?”

“Well, today it was no throat strikes, so that’s shit.”

Gavin tugged on my hand to look at me. “You mean like jabbing someone in the neck?”

“Yeah.”

He stared at me for a long time before shaking his head and laughing. “Jesus, D. I’m so sorry for your loss. Must be tragic.”

“They’re taking away all the fun shit,” I grumbled.

“Nah, I’ve seen you move in there. You’re still doing deadly ‘fun’ shit.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I tugged him along, ready to get out of the rain.

Gavin and I had spent a lot of time talking about the future. While he’d been set on interior design forever, I’d never had a plan for myself, and he was determined to change that. Since fighting was something I was good at that didn’t involve needing a degree, he’d encouraged me to check it out.

Truthfully, I thought he just wanted me to stop all the underground fighting, since the last time we’d gone, a guy in the fight after mine broke his leg in a pretty gruesome, bone-sticking-out way that left Gavin traumatized.

I was giving it a shot. Didn't really matter where I was fighting, as long as I got to. Being with Gavin had given me a sense of peace I'd never felt before, but that didn't mean I wasn't still an aggressive bastard with an urge to knock out assholes. It just happened a little less now.

"Ooh, wait." Gavin squeezed my hand as he caught sight of the Antiques and More sign. "Can we go in for, like, two seconds?"

I glanced at the shop door. "Seriously?"

"Yeah, it's been forever with all my studying and essays. I promise I won't be long."

"That's like me promising not to throat-punch someone in my legit MMA."

Gavin drew a cross over his chest. "Cross my heart."

I sighed and reached for the door. "Fine. You win. But ten minutes, tops."

Gavin's face lit up with a bright smile, and despite the gloomy day, it warmed my insides. "I can promise you five. I just want to check—"

"I know, I know." I held open the door for him. "Go and ask where they keep their compasses."

He chuckled and planted a smacking kiss on my cheek, then all but ran inside as I stowed our umbrellas in the bucket by the front door. Not even a minute later and Gavin was back my side, towing me through the packed aisles. His excitement was palpable as we got closer to his destination.

"He said they're kept in a glass case back here with the— Oh, right there, the broaches."

Gavin came to a stop in front of an old dresser, and sitting on top in the center was a large wooden case. It had a glass lid showing off the items inside, and as Gavin scanned over each one, he was so quiet, you could've heard a pin drop.

"Oh my God!" He grabbed my arm, clasping it tight, as he leaned down closer to the box. "It's here! I found it!"

I shouldn't have been surprised by the strong grip he had, but as his excitement mounted, his fingers dug even harder into my skin, making me wince.

"Found…?"

Gavin whirled around on me, his eyes sparkling with joy. "The compass I've been looking for. The rare silver pocket sundial and compass by

Michael Butterfield, Paris, circa 1700.” He spun back to the case again, this time gently lifting the lid. “Remember? I told you about it?”

Oh, I remembered. I’d filed that little piece of information away in my brain so I could have this very moment here.

“Now that you mention it, I think I do remember.”

“Yeah.” He gently lifted the piece out of the case like it was the Ark of the Covenant. “I told you about it on our first—”

Gavin stopped talking when he spotted my smile, then he looked down at the piece in his hand, then back to me.

“Date.” I stepped in closer, needing to touch him when I said what I did next. “Yeah, I know. That day, something changed for me. I realized that being with you, around you, made me so much happier than being alone.”

“Daire…”

“Let me finish. If I don’t say this now, I’ll probably forget parts of it, and, well, I’ve been looking for this thing since you first showed me it.”

Gavin’s eyes welled, but the smile on his face never dimmed as he stood there staring at me.

“That day we hunted through boxes of weird-ass knobs and fancy ornaments for buildings, I realized one of the biggest things I love about you is that you’re more than just surface. You dig for the treasures you want to find. You’re not afraid to get a little dirty, to look beyond the mess, just like you did with me.”

As a tear escaped and rolled down his cheek, I reached out to swipe it away with my thumb.

“I’m about as wrong for you as anyone could be. More fucked up and messy than anyone deserves—especially you—but I promise, I will never make you sorry for taking a chance on me.”

I covered his hands where he still held on to the sundial. “This is for you. I could’ve given it to you back at our place, but I know you like to hunt, so I made sure they put it somewhere special to find.”

Gavin wiped at his cheeks, and for a heartbeat, I wondered if I’d gone about this all wrong.

I swallowed. “Say something. Did I mess up—”

“No, this is perfect. It’s all perfect. I…I don’t know what to say.”

*Oh thank fuck.* I let out the breath I’d been holding, and as Gavin looked up at me with wet lashes, the words I’d wanted to say came back.

“I’ve never had a real home before. Never had any direction or known what I wanted in life, until you. You’re my compass, Gavin. I’d follow you anywhere.”

He was shaking his head, but it wasn’t because he disagreed with what I said. The wonder in his eyes told me that.

He lifted his hand to rest against my neck, his thumb brushing my cheek. “You’re incredible, you know that?”

No, I didn’t, but every day I spent with Gavin made me all the more determined to feel it. If he believed in me so much, I should too. And maybe I was starting to…just a little.

I turned my head to kiss his thumb. “Do me a favor and don’t tell anyone that. The last thing I need is the guys thinkin’ I’ve gone soft.”

Gavin trailed his fingers over my shirt and poked at my stomach. “Trust me, no one is gonna think that. Have you seen you lately? Jesus. Your abs could cut glass.”

I smirked. “Good.”

“Besides”—he slid an arm around my waist and stepped in close—“I wanna be the only one that gets the gooey marshmallow inside.”

“Gooey marshmallow?” I looked around us and raised a brow. “I don’t know who the hell you’re talkin’ about.”

“I won’t tell anyone that either. Can’t have someone trying to steal what’s mine.” He lifted his chin, and I closed the distance between our mouths, giving him a sweet-as-sugar kiss.

“Thank you,” he said, and brought the compass back up to look at it. “I can’t believe you went to all the trouble to find this for me. I love it. I love *you*.”

I’d gone my entire life never hearing those three little words. Thinking I didn’t need to. That they wouldn’t mean anything anyway, because why would I believe anyone who said them?

But I would never get tired of hearing Gavin telling me he loved me. Not even if I lived to a hundred and he still decided to keep me around. When they came out of his mouth, I could feel the emotion behind them, and it had started to heal the gaping wound inside me.

Pressing a kiss against the top of his head, I said, “I love you.”

He squeezed me tighter, and we both lingered there, just like that, in comfortable silence.

“Did you find what you were— Oh.” The shop owner came to a stop when he caught us tangled up in each other. “Ah. I see you did.”

“Thank you,” I told him, grateful for his help in storing the compass and playing along.

“Anytime.” He winked at me before retreating to the back of the store.

“I think I’ve got a new problem,” Gavin said, pulling away.

“Oh no. Is this one of those addictions where you get what you want then immediately plan for the next thing?”

“No, I was thinking I need something cool to store them in at our place. Most of the ones I’ve collected are at my parents’ house, but this baby’s coming home with us.”

*Home with us.* I liked the way that sounded. Had it really been a few months ago that I’d begrudgingly let him move in with me? I’d never wanted to share my space, but now I couldn’t imagine living there without him.

“I think we can figure something out,” I said. “But your five minutes are up. I’m starving.”

“Uh oh. Better feed you before the beast comes out. Just let me pay real quick—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” I stopped him before he could get far. “You think I tracked this sucker down and didn’t pay for it? Come on now.”

Gavin grinned and took my hand. “I didn’t want to assume, but in that case, I’m paying for dinner.”

I reached for our umbrellas by the door and smirked. “Deal.”

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# FORTY-FOUR

## *gavin*

One month later

“DAMMIT, GAVIN, YOU’VE been holding out on us. Why didn’t you say there were half-naked musclemen crawling the place?” Travis gave a *very* appreciative once-over to the fighters gathered on one side of the gym, which was more like a warehouse with a massive ring in the center of the space.

It was packed with spectators wanting to check out the new lineup of up-and-coming fighters being showcased. I saw more than a few in the crowd from Daire’s underground fighting days, and I wondered if they were here just to watch him.

“Steer clear of those,” West told Travis. “’Roid rage is a thing.”

“So is erectile dysfunction,” I added.

Travis looked back at the guys with disappointment creasing his brow. “Seriously? All those muscles and they can’t get it up? How fuckin’ disappointing.”

Donovan bumped me with his shoulder. “Nervous?”

“Um. Yeah. Obviously.” Truth was, I was almost more nervous for Daire’s opponents. Our friends still had no idea about Daire’s underground fights, thinking I’d convinced him to channel his rage into something more productive. They had no clue what the man could do, or that the Reaper tattoo on his back wasn’t because he was obsessed with death, but because he could bring it.

Then again, this was still pretty new for him, and he wasn't a fan of rules. There was no telling how today would go.

"Well, hopefully he'll still have a face when this is over. I've seen how these things can go."

"Gee, thanks, Van. That's super helpful. Why don't you go give D those words of encouragement and see how *your* face ends up?"

He held his hands up. "Touché."

Preston walked back over from the makeshift drink stand and unscrewed the cap of his water bottle. "Is it bad I wish East was here so we could accidentally push him in the ring?"

I shook my head. "Pretty sure we've all thought that more than once."

"We should've put a hidden camera in the dean's office when we pranked her last year," West said. "Then we could've seen the look on East's face today when she called him and that TA in there to tell him he wouldn't get his credits if he didn't finish his assignment."

"Fuckin' priceless." Travis laughed. "That guy Zac gives him so much shit, and he's had to take it. I'd be watching my back if I was him, though. East enjoys retaliation a little too much."

"And he'll include us in that, no doubt," West agreed. "The last thing I need is being on another Astor shitlist."

The lights dimmed a couple of times, indicating the matches were about to start, and I searched for Daire in the mix of fighters, trying to ignore the butterflies suddenly swirling around in my stomach. As soon as I rose onto my tiptoes, I saw him, and he was already looking my way, like he knew I'd be a ball of worry—which I was trying not to be.

When our eyes locked, I was relieved to see how unbothered he was about the fight, and that settled my stomach somewhat. The announcer began to welcome everyone to the showcase, and Daire winked at me before going back to putting on his gloves.

I took that time to look over his potential opponents, though I knew better than to base anything on size. Daire had taken out guys a foot taller and twice as wide like it was nothing.

"Tonight you'll be getting a taste of the next generation of fighters to come out of Xtreme MMA. We've produced the top fighters in the country for years, and this is the toughest group of men and women we've ever had. We're gonna kick things off with two of our new recruits, Tanya and Bobbi."

As the two women took up their sides of the ring and the fight began, I could see my friends' eyes go wide.

"Shit, they're *vicious*," Preston said, and the fact that he looked totally out of place in a sweater vest made his comment even funnier to me.

Actually, none of us fit in among the crowd, even though Daire had insisted I wear his leather jacket and a hat again. But the fact that everyone came—minus East, who was doing his own form of punishment—meant the world to Daire, even though he'd never say it. He was finally coming to understand that even with all the hell we gave each other, we'd always be there to support or bury the bodies.

Even though I worried someone would one day take the latter too literally.

Someone tall stepped in front of us, camera flashing and blocking our view.

"Hey, asshole," Travis said, "You're in the w—" His words cut off as the guy turned around, his face an all-too-familiar one. Surprise lit Travis's eyes before his expression darkened. "Caleb? What the hell are you doing here?"

The guy lifted up the badge he wore around his neck. "I was hired for the event. Calm down."

"How about you and your camera fuck off somewhere else?"

Caleb stared at him with inscrutable eyes for a long moment, and it looked like he wanted to say something before he shook his head and snapped his mouth shut. He backed away without another word, heading over to the other side of the ring, while beside me Travis practically vibrated with some emotion I couldn't understand.

"You okay?"

He forced his shoulders down and blew out a breath. "Yep."

It was strange to see Travis of all people so worked up, since he was such a damn flirt with everyone who crossed his path. All but one.

The crowd shouted suddenly, and I looked back up to the ring to see one of the women pinned with her leg behind her head.

"Vicious *and* flexible," Preston murmured as the referee counted down and then declared the woman on top the winner.

"Regretting switching sides already?" I teased.

"Uh, no. I'd actually be terrified to lie in a bed beside either one of them."

I couldn’t blame him for that. The women *were* fierce and could certainly kick any of our asses. Then again, Preston was best friends with Serena, and if he could survive her finding out he was dating her dad, I was pretty sure he could handle the two down on the mat.

I was about to tell him so when the fairly calm crowd erupted in a chant: “Reaper! Reaper! Reaper!”

I stiffened, knowing I must’ve missed Daire’s announcement. In just a pair of shorts and sparring gloves, he stepped into the ring as the announcer introduced his opponent.

Daire had already been in amazing shape, but all his weeks of training had added a few pounds of muscle that I’d definitely taken advantage of.

“Reaper?” West reached over and shoved me in the arm. “Isn’t that what’s inked on your boy’s back?”

He got his answer when Daire turned away, the tattoo on his back on full display.

Nearby, a couple of the guys I recognized from the underground blew out whistles, and then one said, “Holy shit, he’s even bigger than he was at the last fight.”

“Twenty bucks says he forgets the rules and accidentally murders this guy.”

The guy snorted. “They don’t call him the Reaper for nothing.”

Donovan wasn’t shy about eavesdropping on their conversation, and as he looked between Daire and the two in the crowd, he whacked me in the arm.

“What’s he mean, ‘last fight’? I thought this was his *first* fight.”

I wasn’t touching that. I kept my lips zipped and ignored my brother staring a hole in the side of my face.

“Wait,” Travis said. “That tattoo is a *nickname*? I thought he was into some weird-ass voodoo shit on the roof or something.”

Leave it to him to butt into a stranger’s conversation.

“Hey,” he said, tapping one on the shoulder. “You’ve seen that Reaper dude fight before, huh?”

“Fight?” The guy scoffed. “More like annihilate. Not sure he knows how to do anything else. I already placed bets he’ll lose his shit and throat-punch his opponent.”

Travis’s eyes widened. “Uh, is there something you’re not tellin’ us, young Truitt?” he asked me.

With all our friends' eyes on me, keeping my lips zipped was becoming an increasingly difficult task.

"Is Daire some secret assassin warrior fighter?" West waggled his brows.

"Yeah, that's exactly it." I shook my head and directed them to focus their attention on the ring. "How about you all just shut up and watch?"

"Someone is a little bit touchy," Travis pointed out, but that wasn't it at all. I was nervous. Daire had trained so hard for this, and wanted it so badly, I couldn't help but worry what would happen if things didn't go well.

I watched with laser focus as Daire and his opponent met in the middle of the ring with the referee, who was no doubt telling them to have a clean fight, touch gloves, and head back to their corners. Unlike the host of the underground, who basically said, *Anything goes, just don't kill each other.*

"Gav, you okay?" Donovan rubbed my arm. "You look a little pale."

"How can you tell?" West laughed to himself, but Preston nodded.

"He does look a shade whiter than usual."

"I'm just… I'm nervous, okay?" I said.

"Oh, come on, any guy that has a reaper inked on him isn't going down without a fight." Travis pursed his lips, giving me a once-over. "I mean, does he? Go down without a fight?"

I shoved him in the arm. "Like I'd tell you."

"Man, what is it with everyone lately? You find a guy, hook up, and suddenly it's like you all signed some sexual NDA. You used to be such a fun bunch. It's so disappointing."

"Yeah, because now we *care* about who we're with." Donovan patted him on the shoulder. "You should try it sometime."

I tuned Travis out and focused back on the ring. My nerves eased somewhat as Daire ran his tongue over the required mouth guard. He'd bitched and moaned after every training match about how uncomfortable the damn thing was, and while I commiserated, I was secretly happy to know that he would finally have some sort of protection during his fight. Including the sparring gloves he wore.

The sound of the mic switching on came over the sound system and filtered through the speakers as the referee looked at Daire and said, "Ready to fight?" When Daire nodded, the referee turned his attention to his opponent and asked the same question. Once he got the all-clear, he clapped his hands together and the bell sounded.

The crowd quieted, a hum of excitement filling the warehouse as the two men began to size one another up. This part of the fight felt very similar to the underground, the way Daire was zeroing in on his opponent, no doubt looking for any kind of tells before he pounced—then it happened.

Daire was across the mat, striking out first with a quick jab to the chest and cross-blow to the jaw, starting off strong. His opponent fell back a step, stumbling over his feet at the force of that first punch. But he was quick to recover, bouncing back on his toes like he hadn't just seen the Milky Way spinning over his head. His eyes tracked Daire as they moved around the ring.

I brought a hand up to my mouth, biting down on my nail, as the guy made a rush for Daire. He kicked out and landed a blow to Daire's thigh at the same time he struck him with an uppercut to the face.

"Motherfucking *ouch*!" West winced as Daire's head snapped back, and I couldn't help but do the same, because that one had to *hurt*.

"Reaper! Reaper!" The crowd started up again, and like something had just gone off in his brain—or been knocked loose—Daire straightened, rolled his shoulders, and narrowed his eyes on the man opposite him.

The *Reaper* had finally come out to play.

"Is it me or does Daire look like he suddenly wants to—oh *shit*"—Travis feinted to the left like he was the one dodging Daire's fist—"kill that guy?"

Another cross-hook, and Daire was grabbing "that guy's" shoulders and pulling him down to land a hard knee strike to the stomach. There was a loud gasp of air from the man as Daire moved in, shifted slightly down, then hooked a leg around his opponent's and tackled him to the ground.

Once they were there, there was a whole lot of rolling around and punching that was difficult to see from where we stood. But since the referee didn't call a stop to it, I figured it was all by the rules as Daire straddled his opponent and began to land strike after strike to his head.

"Sweet mother of— Gavin?" Travis grinned at me. "You let him straddle you like this at home?"

I flipped him off, but my eyes never wavered from the fight. Daire tightened his thighs and rolled, moving the two of them across the mat until he was taking the other man in a chokehold. Daire wound an arm around his neck and his legs around his waist.

I caught West in my periphery looking my way. "Don't say it."

“So that’s a yes. Got it.”

I shook my head, but as the man in Daire’s hold thumped the mat once, twice, and then a third time, the fight was called and the Reaper reigned supreme.

“Hell yes!” I called out as the crowd went wild.

The guys whooped and whistled, there were more chants of “Reaper, Reaper!” and as the referee held up Daire’s arm, I could’ve sworn he almost grinned.

Almost.

“The next match begins in ten minutes,” the announcer said, and as the lights went up again, I pushed through the crowd in the direction Daire had gone.

I wasn’t sure whether it was okay to hug him or show any kind of affection in this setting, in front of all these people, so as I approached I kept my hands to myself, though I couldn’t have dimmed my smile if I tried.

But if there was one thing I loved about Daire, it was that he gave no fucks whatsoever.

As soon as I was in grabbing distance, he swooped me into his arms, lifted me clear off my feet, and crashed his lips down on mine. His skin was slick with sweat, and I could feel the way the adrenaline was still running through him from his rapid heartbeat.

I didn’t care. I was so damn excited for him and glad his head was still on his shoulders that he could’ve been a bloody mess and I still would’ve wrapped myself around him.

He pulled his head back to look at me but still kept his arms tight around my waist. “You proud? I didn’t break any rules.”

I laughed and gave him another quick kiss, glad he’d removed the mouth guard already. “Keep that up and you might have the whole place chanting your name next time.”

“Fuck me, that was insane,” West said as the guys caught up to us.

“Yeah, I knew you liked to punch things, but that was impressive,” Preston added.

Daire lowered me to my feet but kept me close. “If you want me to practice on anyone, let me know.”

“Uh, I have a serious bone to pick with you, and not the kind I like.” Travis crossed his arms. “Reaper? You have some explaining to do.”

Daire glanced at me, and I shook my head, letting him know I hadn't said a word.

"Amazing fight, man," Donovan said, bumping knuckles with Daire, who still wore his gloves. "Kelly would love watching this shit."

Daire nodded in acknowledgment, and I elbowed him to say something.

"I, uh, appreciate you guys being here." The words came out stilted, but they were more than he'd ever bothered with in the past.

Preston smiled, answering for everyone. "Yeah?"

Daire nodded. "Yeah."

It was like no one had any clue what to say to something nice coming out of his mouth, and when an awkward silence passed, Daire cleared his throat and added, "Now get the fuck out so I can spend time with my guy."

Now *that* they knew how to respond to. They all peaced out and headed for the exit.

"Free to leave, or do you have to stay?" I asked, grinning at him and hoping for option one.

"You should know by now." He pulled me back in, flush with his body. "I do want I want."

"I like that…" I was shameless, rubbing myself against him, and he lowered his mouth to my ear.

"And right now I wanna do you."

I turned my head so I could capture those sweet-talking lips, but I'd barely brushed my mouth over his when Travis came back.

"Wait, you never answered about the Rea—"

"Fuck off," Daire growled in a tone that brooked no argument, and I chuckled as he closed the distance between us again. "Now, where were we?"

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*thank you*

Thanks for reading Possessive Park Avenue Prince!

Who knew that Daire had such a…*soft* side? Seems it only comes out for a certain prince though. Lucky Gavin!

So you know what we're going to ask you next, right? There's only two princes left, any guesses who it will be?

Salacious Park Avenue Prince

Want a chance to be part of our ARC Team and receive our next couple early? Fill out the form below.

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Craving more of our Park Avenue Princes? You'll see all the guys again soon, including Daire and Gavin, in the next standalone in the series. But until then, you can read West and JT's story, Infamous Park Avenue Prince here:

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# about brooke blaine

Brooke Blaine is a USA Today Bestselling Author best known for writing romantic comedy and M/M romance. Her novels lead with humor and heart, but Brooke never shies away from throwing in something extra naughty that will scandalize her conservative Southern family for life (bless their hearts).

She's a choc-o-holic, lives for eighties bands (which means she thinks guyliner is totally underrated), believes it's always wine o'clock, and lives with the coolest cat on the planet—her Ragdoll/Maine Coon mix, Jackson Agador Spartacus.

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# about ella frank

Ella Frank is the *USA Today* Bestselling Author of the *Temptation series,* including Try, Take, and Trust and is the co-author of the fan-favorite *Fallen Angel series.* Her *Prime Time series* has been praised as “highly entertaining!” and “sexy as hell!”

A life-long fan of the romance genre, Ella is best known for her steamy, heartfelt, M/M romances.

**If you’d like to get to know Ella better, you can find her getting up to all kinds of shenanigans at:**

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